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If you think that Shoghi Effendi's writings were the pinnacle of the English language, then you obviously haven't read anything by Douglas Adams.Adams, of course, is the author of the wildly famous *Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (H2G2) series of books. Plainly put Adams was a wordsmith; someone who awed you with his eloquence and playful mastery of his craft.I remember the first time that I read Adams. I got goose bumps. I thought, you can *do* that? I had no idea til then that simple words in the English language could be combined in such a way. Here's an example:

> There is an art, [...] or rather, a knack to flying. The knack lies in learning how to throw yourself at the ground and miss.

Who writes like that? I mean, who thinks like that?

Underneath the light-hearted comedy and critique of human foibles, it isn't difficult to spot Adams' fascination with scientific ideas like chaos theory, quantum mechanics and quantum physics. Adams loved and appreciated science and within a very short time after the publication of H2G2, some of the most prominent scientists of our time became his biggest fans.

Douglas Adams was many things; a successful author; a loving father and husband; a towering man of more than 6 feet; a fan of science and scientists; a radical atheist (a label he applied to himself so others wouldn't mistake him for a dithering agnostic); a lover of gadgets and technology (especially the Macintosh). But prolific, he was not.

He used to make light of his chronic writer's block by saying that he loved deadlines… especially the whooshing sound they made as they flew past one's head. And due to his untimely death in 2001, we will only have his H2G2 books, a few other lesser known works, and some incomplete manuscripts.

Adams was frustrated that it took around 20 years for his iconic work to make it onto the big sceen. He once quipped that the Hollywood process is like "trying to grill a steak by having a succession of people coming into the room and breathing on it." Unfortunately, I

don’t think the movie quite captures his brilliance. But then again, it simple can’t. I think its impossible to successfully carry over all the elements from one medium to another.

I still recommend that you go see The Hitch Hiker’s Guide movie. If nothing else, consider it a good, long commercial for the books. An after seeing the movie, do your brain a favor and read the whole trilogy (yes, all five parts). And after you’re done, don’t forget Douglas Adams’ lesser known but equally brilliant books about Dirk Gently – an idiot savant version of Sherlock Holmes.

You won’t think of life, the universe and everything (including the English language) in quite the same way ever again.

No related posts.

A Chat with a Baha’i Youth in Iran

I’m grateful to a “Anonymouz”, a reader, who forwarded an informal chat with a Baha’i youth living in Iran. The youth gave their permission for their conversation with Anonymouz to be made public (omitting his name).

My comment regarding the equal susceptibility of Baha’i youth in Iran to the same societal pressures as other youth upset a few fellow Baha’is. We seem to have an idealized picture of Baha’i youth as spotless “Supermans”, somehow remaining pure even while swimming

in the foulest muck. While I don't doubt that there are Baha'i youth in Iran who do fit that bill, I also acknowledge that they are for the most part, human, just like you and I.

Being young and living in a very harsh and restrictive atmosphere, it is only natural that they "rebel". This is true for religious youth or those who have no real religious identities or beliefs. Such pressures are even more pronounced when the ideals of the Baha'i Faith are heaped upon them and to top it off! the constant and growing pressure of potential religious persecution.

Depression is rampant among the Iranian youth. So is drug abuse and other activities not suitable for explicit mention in a family friendly blog. In any case, I hope that my characterization of the unfortunate situation in the Cradle of the Faith is not misconstrued by some as an attack on the precious Baha'i youth in Iran but rather as even more reasons why they deserve to exit and live in a free and just society.

What follows is an informal, somewhat rambling "chat". I'm sure your honors will forgive Anonymouz for *leading the witness*. The Baha'i youth in Iran, whoever he or she is, does offer some interesting information. Finally, I should also mention that I simply take Anonymouz on his/her word and have no way to verify if s/he did indeed have this conversation with a Baha'i in Iran. Enjoy and please keep the Baha'is of Iran in your thoughts and prayers.

[START DOCUMENT]
Baha'i youth in Iran: allah u abha Mr …!!!!
Me: Allah'u'Abha!
Me: Chetori agha [how are you]

Baha'i youth in Iran: mamnoon [thankful]
Baha'i youth in Iran: tnx
Baha'i youth in Iran: khosh migzare??? [good times?]
Me: sareh kar'am [im at work]
Me: khastegee [tierd]
Baha'i youth in Iran: oo then I shouldn't disturb you
Me: No please
Me: its ok
Baha'i youth in Iran: ooo

Baha’i youth in Iran: ok
Me: I work online
Me: with an internet company
Baha’i youth in Iran: @-)
Baha’i youth in Iran: O my God
Me: Haha
Me: tell me something
Baha’i youth in Iran: about???
Me: Ayatollah Montazeri
Me: what does the Baha’is think of his fatwa?
Baha’i youth in Iran: they like it
Baha’i youth in Iran: about this man.. I should say that after KHomeini he was the leader of Iran
Me: I know
Baha’i youth in Iran: ok about this fatwa
Me: but it seems the government became more angry
Baha’i youth in Iran: yes they are always angry with any thing that stand against them
Baha’i youth in Iran: but they can’t do any thing about Mr montazeri
Baha’i youth in Iran: because he is the most important ayyatollah after khameneyi(our dear leader:x)
Me: I see
Me: tell me something else
Me: do Baha’i youth party a lot in iran?
Baha’i youth in Iran: oh no
Me: like other young people?
Baha’i youth in Iran: all of them are leaving iran
Baha’i youth in Iran: no
Baha’i youth in Iran: we can not do very important doings
Me: javanan dar iran behtar as javoona degar neestan? [young people in Iran are better behaved than other?]
Baha’i youth in Iran: I don not know realy
Me: masalan rajeba [for example regarding] drinking and drugs
Baha’i youth in Iran: but if one of us has aproblem that we can do something for him we do any thing

Baha’i youth in Iran: ooo

Baha’i youth in Iran: no most of them never drink

Me: man fekr meekonam ke javanon [I think that the youth] Bahai are well behaved

Baha’i youth in Iran: but some of them smoke cigarette

Me: thats no big deal

Me: not against baha’i faith

Baha’i youth in Iran: oooo

Baha’i youth in Iran: yes

Baha’i youth in Iran: most of the bahai youth are the best people on the earth

Me: vali az nazreh man kheili beshtar as musalmoon o massiyeh o yahudi behtaran [but in my opinion they really stand out against the muslim, christian and jewish]

Me: karanash [in the behavior]

Me: harf zadan [in their speech]

Baha’i youth in Iran: albate [of course]

Baha’i youth in Iran: ok did u ever travel to Iran???

Me: in the future, I want to travel or live abroad

Baha’i youth in Iran: one month 2 month???one year??

Me: zendegee [for life]

Me: yeh soaleh degeh daram [I have another question]

Baha’i youth in Iran: ask it

Baha’i youth in Iran: please:P

Me: beshtareh as javoonaan dar Iran, ba ham degeh ziyad doreh ham’an ? [do most of the youth in Iran hang out together]

Me: Bahaiyah

Baha’i youth in Iran: 2 years ago yes because we had gathering like youth gathering ang teenagers gathering..picnics and…….

Baha’i youth in Iran: but we c

Me: femeekonam nafahmeedee [I dont think you got it]

Me: =-)

Baha’i youth in Iran: chera fahmidam [yes I understood]

Me: beeshtareh doostat Bahai hastan? [are all your friends Baha’is?]

Baha’i youth in Iran: no I have both Bahai and cristian and muslim friends

Me: and they all know you are Bahai?

Baha’i youth in Iran: yes

Me: They know Bahais do not drink or smoke opium?
Baha'i youth in Iran: I found a new friend which is zoroastrian:d
Baha'i youth in Iran: she is a girl:P
Me: doost'at meedoon'an keh shoma va javoonan'eh Baha'i taryak va mashrugh nemekhoran? [your friends know that you and other bahai youth dont smoke or do drugs?]
Baha'i youth in Iran: yes
Baha'i youth in Iran: but they can not belive
Me: fekr meekonee keh javoonan bahai degar hameen toreh? [I think most of the youth are in similar]
Baha'i youth in Iran: no:(some of them drink
Baha'i youth in Iran: and it makes the face of some of bahai comunities dark
Me: vali beeshtarehshoon nemikon'an [but most of them dont]
Baha'i youth in Iran: 90%:(
Me: 90% meekonan ya nimikonam? [90% drink or dont drink]
Baha'i youth in Iran: dont drink
Me: khoobeh [thats good]
Baha'i youth in Iran: how about bahai's in america
Me: dar america va europe paeentareh [in america and europe its lower]
Me: vali 90% khayli khoobeh [but 90% is really good]
Baha'i youth in Iran: naaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
Baha'i youth in Iran: it is horrible
Me: khoobeh ke ino fekrmeekonee [its good that you think this]
Baha'i youth in Iran: we shouldn't have any drink in bahai's
Me: I agree
Me: zee'ad doost dokhtar o doost pesar bazi hast dar jashneh Bahai? [is there a lot of boyfriend girl friend stuff with Baha'is]
Me: to iran
Baha'i youth in Iran: :-O na baba
Me: ajab [amazing]
Me: fekrmeekonee keh injooriyeh dar har shahr? [is it like this in most cities?]
Baha'i youth in Iran: all the cities
Baha'i youth in Iran: if they have, they have a muslim one:d
Me: ajab [amazing]
Me: I read in the news that a new website will be created that it is anti-Bahai

Me: in Iran

Baha'i youth in Iran: I didn't hear about this

Me: [site link]

Baha'i youth in Iran: ok it is a usual thing in iran

Me: well thats ok then

Me: no big deal

Baha'i youth in Iran: even the flea doesn't bite us

Baha'i youth in Iran: a proverb

Baha'i youth in Iran: we have thick skins

Me: har sol fekrmeekonee chand nafr musalmoon Bahai meeshan? [how many muslims become Baha'is each year]

Baha'i youth in Iran: till last year 10 to 12 or less but from last year 60 or 70

Baha'i youth in Iran: or more:D

Me: wow

Me: why do you think?

Baha'i youth in Iran: because of the siyuation of iran and the people who are tired of lie

Baha'i youth in Iran: situation

Me: VEVAK spies on Bahais?

Baha'i youth in Iran: what is vevak????

Baha'i youth in Iran: like cia?

Me: Vezarat-e Ettela'at va Amniat-e Keshvar [successor to SAVAK]

Baha'i youth in Iran: yes

Baha'i youth in Iran: they controll our phones

Baha'i youth in Iran: and mobiles

Me: how do you know?

Me: can you hear them?

Baha'i youth in Iran: the record some of our speech

Baha'i youth in Iran: Baha'i youth in Iran: they arrest yaran [de facto NSA] last year and show them some aoff party films of marriage and let them to listen to some of that recordings that show them that we have a bad comunity

Me: but recording a wedding is not bad

Baha'i youth in Iran: yes we know…….but some of bahai women and girl can not control them selves and wear some dresses which make this kind of problems

Me: I see

Me: But Muslims are worse

Me: in this case

Baha'i youth in Iran: I know that all people are free in this subjects but in iran …….you know thw situation

Baha'i youth in Iran: ooo

Baha'i youth in Iran: thay are awful

Me: Can you tell me something that happend to you

Baha'i youth in Iran: because they have less freedom than bahais or cristian or hebrews

Baha'i youth in Iran: about this controlls????

Me: harrassment

Me: yes

Baha'i youth in Iran: I hadn't any problems but big bahai's like yarane iran have

Baha'i youth in Iran: they make problems for us but not very bad and big problems

Me: What can American Baha'is do to help?

Baha'i youth in Iran: they can report this problems too their friends and show them that the love of baha is so powerful and help them to know baha

Me: When Beit'ul Adl [UHJ] wrote that letter to javoonaneh Iran

Me: how was it received?

Baha'i youth in Iran: which one?:D

Me: haha

Baha'i youth in Iran: about university???

Me: It was very public

Baha'i youth in Iran: or the last one??????

Me: like 2 years go

Baha'i youth in Iran: wow

Me: let me find it…

Baha'i youth in Iran: we gathered

Baha'i youth in Iran: I think

Baha'i youth in Iran: because when we had a message from universal .. we gathered and studied that

Baha'i youth in Iran: [site link]

Baha'i youth in Iran: it is a link

Baha'i youth in Iran: so funny

Me: Chee ast?

Baha’i youth in Iran: if you can read farsi
Baha’i youth in Iran: it is so funny
Me: roo sedah
Baha’i youth in Iran: no no
Baha’i youth in Iran: you should read it
Me: I need to read more in Persian
Baha’i youth in Iran: ok
Baha’i youth in Iran: you it is a conversation between an akhond and a girl
Me: haha
Me: akhondha kheli kharan [mullahs are very dumb]
Baha’i youth in Iran: the girl is khartar [dumber]
Baha’i youth in Iran: the girl asked the akhoond [mullah] if the presenter in Tv said salam we should answer it or not????=))
Me: hahahah
Me: Me: ok
Me: time for a break
Me: I will be back in 15 minutes
Baha’i youth in Iran: maybe I leave the net ok??

[END DOCUMENT]

Abdul-Baha in America Centenary Celebrations

The international Baha’i community has been preparing for the centenary celebration of Abdu’l-Baha’s visit to the West for more than two years. Every single community, large or small, will in some way observe the historic visit.

Not surprisingly, the largest celebrations are happening in the US. Below is a list of some of these:

The US Baha'i community has created a beautiful new website to aggregate and organize information on these events: Abdu'l-Baha in America 1912-2012

From there you can follow the city by city travels of the Master, read press clippings and see photos of the people and places. Here's a gallery of photos of Abdu'l-Baha. They also have a list of events commemorating the centenary in major cities (Chicago, Washington, New York, San Francisco and Philadelphia).

There are also several multi-media and social media initiatives. One of the most intriguing is called "239 Days in America" which will chronicle Abdu'l-Baha's itinerary on an hour by hour basis through twitter (@239Days) and using facebook's new timeline feature. Their website will also feature more in depth feature article.

239 Days in Ameica is the collaborative effort of Rob Sockett, Jonathan Menon and Caitlin Shayda Jones. Follow the Master along 100 years in the past using either twitter, facebook or their own website.

Kathleen Holmlund has created another website to document Abdu'l-Baha's travel to the West. It too will feature daily reports of the activities of the Master and His travels. You can view the entries based on the country: US, UK, France, and other countries.

"The Journey West" is another group initiative with the same purpose as the other projects mentioned already. As well as stories and pictures of Abdu'l-Baha's visit to the West, it also features a podcast reading of the many talks Abdu'l-Baha gave in churches, halls and people's homes.

The blog "Abdu'l-Baha's Journey in America" may be stylistically simpler and more humble than the previous online projects but it makes up for that by the sheer volume and quality of its content. Anne Perry has been writing consistently since April 2011 and has done a fantastic job describing the visit on a daily basis as well as showcasing the many individuals that Abdu'l-Baha came in contact with.

To complement the online travel journal, along with her husband Tim Perry and Bahram Jalalizadeh, Anne has also been working on a film documentary titled Luminous Journey. It has yet to be released but you can watch a short trailer at the previous link.

Another great resource to learn more about Abdu'l-Baha's visit to the West (it involved much more than just the US!) is from wikipedia. Rainn Wilson has also published an interesting article: The Titanic's Forgotten Survivor.

Finally, to finish off the list, I wanted to share with you an article written by Sen McGlinn which addresses the often misunderstood and therefore controversial quote of Abdu'l-Baha from one of His talks in America: Abdu'l-Baha and the African tribe.

And don't forget, Kalimat Press is celebrating the event by providing their customers with a special gift on Baha'i books.

Abdu'l-Baha on Diet and Medicine

I remember reading the quote below from Abdu'l-Baha many years ago and wondering exactly how in the world it would be possible to cure serious diseases with diet.

> It is, therefore, evident that it is possible to cure by foods, aliments and fruits; but as today the science of medicine is imperfect, this fact is not yet fully grasped. When the science of medicine reaches perfection, treatment will be

> given by foods, aliments, fragrant fruits and vegetables, and by various waters, hot and cold in temperature.
> ‘Abdu’l-Bah?? in Some Answered Questions

Then I stumbled on this video from TED that illuminates one very real and practical path that is being taken by modern science. It is astonishing when we remind ourselves that Abdu’l-Baha’s words precede this research by more than 100 years:

Dr. William Li’s list of antiangiogenic foods

Can we eat to starve cancer?

The Angiogenesis Foundation

No related posts.

Ali Nakhjavani Speaks on the Covenant (part I)

Dr. Ali Nakhjavani, a former member of the Universal House of Justice, talks on the Covenant:

Biography
After he received his Bachelor of Arts degree with distinction from the American University of Beirut in 1939, in the early 1940s Mr. Nakhjavani returned to Iran. He was a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'iss of Iran from 1950 to 1951.

In 1951, Mr. Nakhjavani and his family moved to Uganda, where he worked as a teacher and lecturer. He was a member of the Auxiliary Board for the Propagation in Africa from 1954 to 1961 and chairman of the National Spiritual Assembly of Central and East Africa from 1956 to 1961.

In 1961, Mr. Nakhjavani was elected to the International Baha'is Council and served as its president. He was elected to the Universal House of Justice in 1963 and served continuously as a member of the institution until his retirement in 2003.

Mr. Nakhjavani is tied with Mr. H. Fatheazam for the second longest term as a member of the Universal House of Justice. The record holder for the longest continuous membership belongs to Mr. Ian Semple (1963-2004).

The Covenant

I've already touched on the subject of the Covenant and for now I'll simply present this video. Perhaps a commentary will be upcoming shortly.

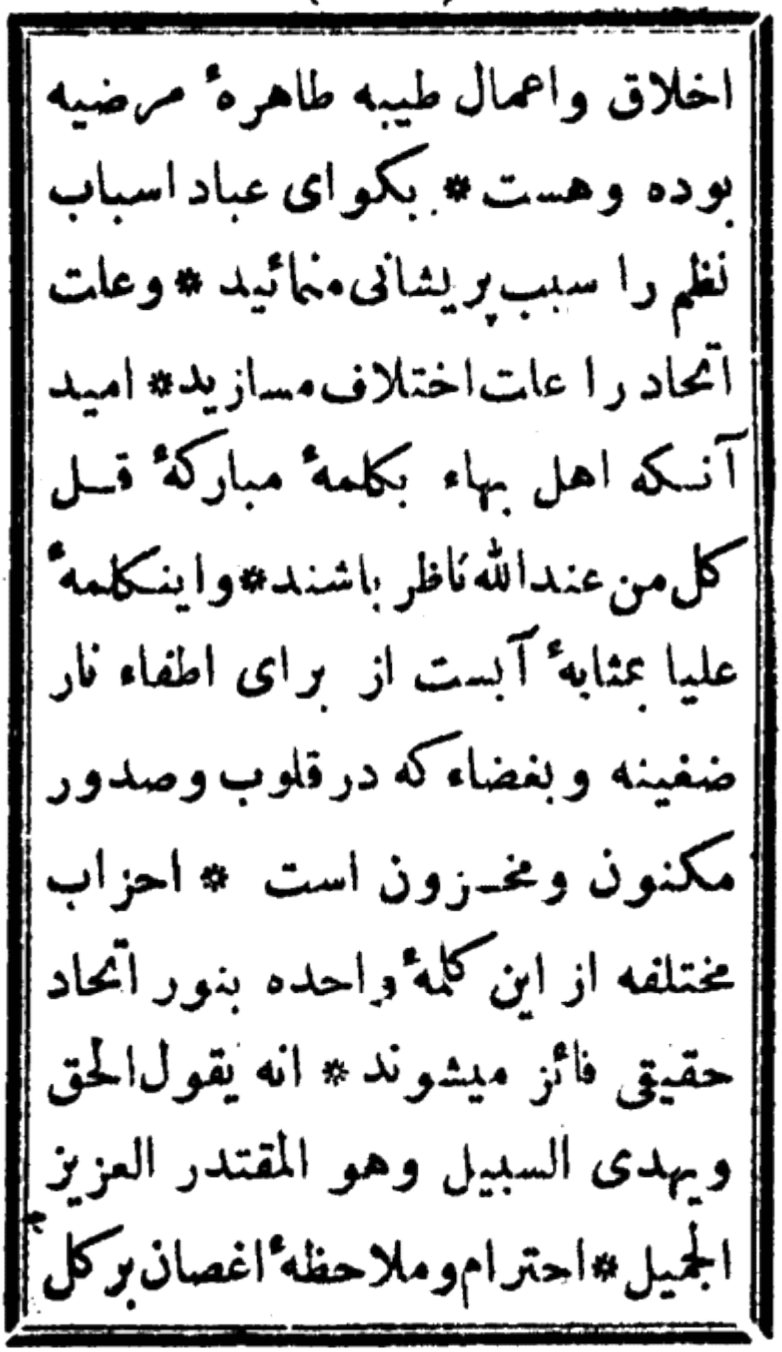
All Things Are of God

That rabblerouser, Brian Taraz, is at it again!

Now he's come up with a brilliant plan. I'll let him describe it in his own words:

Who's up for a "deed"-a-thon?

"Say: O servants! Let not the means of order be made the cause of confusion and the instrument of union an occasion for discord. We fain would hope that the people of Baha may be guided by the blessed words: 'SAY: ALL THINGS ARE OF GOD.' This exalted utterance is like unto water for quenching the fire of hate and enmity which smouldereth within the hearts and breasts of men. BY THIS SINGLE UTTERANCE contending peoples and kindreds will attain the light of true unity. Verily He speaketh the truth and leadeth the way. He is the All-Powerful, the Exalted, the Gracious. (Baha'u'llah, Tablets of Baha'u'llah, p. 222)



اخلاق واعمال طیبه طاهرهٔ مرضیه
بوده وهست * بکوای عباد اسباب
نظم را سبب پریشانی منمائید * وعلت
اتحاد را علت اختلاف مسازید * امید
آنکه اهل بهاء بکلمهٔ مبارکهٔ قل
کل من عندالله ناظر باشند * واینکلمهٔ
علیا بمثابهٔ آبست از برای اطفاء نار
ضغینه وبغضاء که در قلوب وصدور
مکنون ومخزون است * احزاب
مختلفه از این کلمهٔ واحده بنور اتحاد
حقیقی فائز میشوند * انه یقول الحق
ویهدی السبیل وهو المقتدر العزیز
الجمیل * احترام وملاحظهٔ اغصان بر کل

This passage is from the Kitab-i-Ahd. Baha'u'llah's "Book of My Covenant".

Here's the thing-

The phrase is "**Say: All things are of God**". The claim is that this SINGLE UTTERANCE can quench enmity and that "by it" peoples and kindreds WILL attain the light of true unity.

There are no caveats. No preconditions that the “UTTERERS” of this phrase need to be Baha’i.

So . . . I’d like to suggest a challenge to ourselves.

From now until May 23rd, the Declaraton of the Bab, that we utter this phrase daily and “see” what happens.

I’m a romantic so I’d imagine doing it with the same frequency of Muslim prayer. But it could be a morning or evening thing.

ANYWAY – I believe it should be uttered/intoned/chanted/sung whatever way provides internal resonance for the person.
And it has no phrasing that requires any particular Faith confession. So it can be a prayer/ meditation/affirmation/mantra etc.

So? Let’s try it.

In spite of the way some people think – the act of verbalized articulation is not simply “words” but is simultaneously a deed.

Let’s do it.
Who’s game?

Peace
Brian

(I’m in. Are you?)

Allah or God?

This news report from the BBC peaked my curiosity (below). It is about a church in Kuala Lampur that uses the word ‘Allah’ to refer to God in their services. The Muslims are not happy about that and are saying that this will cause ‘confusion’. Click play to watch the clip:

This reminded me of the continuing court case between the NSA of the Baha'is of the United States and the Orthodox Baha'i group in the US. The NSA lost the case last year and has appealed the case – everyone is waiting for a decision any minute (day, month, etc.) now.

Similar to the Muslim Malaysians, the NSA is asking the Court to enforce a previous ruling which gave them the sole and exclusive rights of the word "Baha'i".

I'm not making this up. How I wish I was!

They've gone after them in fine litigious style befitting Scientology. The NSA's aim is to prevent a small group of people from using the word Baha'i – claiming in the presented evidence before the court that it would 'confuse' people.

The NSA has already lost once. And once the appeals court ruling arrives, they may very well lose again. But I'm not referring to an unfavorable verdict. Although by any sane stretch of the imagination, one wonders how in the world the term "Baha'i" can be the sole exclusive property and trademark of an organization when other words like Christian, Muslim, Jew, etc. are in the public domain.

No, what I mean is that the Baha'is of the US will lose the PR battle – as they already have. Take a look at this article from the Chicago Tribune (thanks to Baha'is Online for highlighting this article).

> "The word Baha'i carries with it implications for a certain sets of beliefs — and we have to protect that," said Robert Stockman

Can you imagine for one second the Roman Catholic Church suing the Protestant Church over their concern that they had the monopoly on what the word "Christian" means, and that this means it has to be protected?

For some strange reason the Office of Public Information from Wilmette refused to talk to the newspaper about this article. Instead they turned to Robert Stockman, a US Baha'i. For all his best intentions, Stockman comes across as loonie as a Scientologist. I can't imagine he would have gone on the record unless he was given the approval from the NSA to talk to the press. Which makes his ramblings all the more odd.

If you'd like to know what this is all about, read this original post with detailed background information about the Orthodox Baha'i court case.

American Nation – Brian Taraz

TUNEWIDGET Powered by ReverbNation

An interview with Brian Taraz

An Interview With Brian Taraz – Part I

I'm very happy to bring to you the first interview on Baha'i Rants and it is with none other than Brian Taraz.

Brian is an actor, musician, singer, father, husband, Baha'i and much more (though not necessarily in that order everyday). You can listen to some of his music at purevolume. My favourite is 'the prayer for the dead'. Brian has also launched an impressive personal initiative project online which he calls Kitab-i-Kuchik. For those who don't know Persian, it means The Little Book.

So without further ado, let's get to part I of the interview:

Hi Brian, how are you? Ready for the interview?

Hi Baquia, Thanks for the questions. Kind of weird for me to think about "myself" so to speak.

Tell us a bit about yourself. How did you learn of the Baha'i Faith? when did you declare and why?

Born in NYC, 1962. Parents were both Baha'is. In fact they were both on the LSA up until my 15th birthday. That's when I declared. The why is because I believed in Baha'u'llah and the Faith and declaring at 15 was just the thing to do.

Had the blessings of seeing and meeting folks like Mr. Furutan and Mr. Khadem, Rhuyiyiih Khanum, members of the House of Justice, Seals and Crofts, etc.

I don't remember how old I was when we bought the current Baha'i Center, but I was part of the first crew to clean it out. It had been a porn movie theatre. I remember we found a 35 mm copy of "The Devil in Miss Jones".

Not to be confused with the 1941 classic: "The Devil *and* Miss Jones" (laugh)

Right. Went to Green Acre all the time and a Baha'i school up in Poughkeepsie, New York. Had the blessing of visiting Iran as a kid and going to the house of the Bab. Went with my parents to Haifa when I was 9 on their pilgrimage.

So – Baha'i, Baha'i, Baha'i.

Wow, that is such a blessing.

Luckily though, I grew up in a Jewish neighborhood and went to A YMHA camp. I went to two different Catholic High Schools (one Jesuit and one Franciscan). Before I was "old enough to know better", because New York is what New York is, I experienced "sex" stuff and drugs and – on account of being a kid and not knowing that I should have felt differently – I really, really liked that stuff.

Simultaneously, and probably the thing which provoked the "worm" within my being, was the traditional Baha'i divorce thing. That cognitive dissonance that many people born "into" the Faith have to deal with. I'm also half-Iranian and half-Argentinian. So New York was the perfect place for me to grow up.

Went to many conferences. Saw the shiny happy people during the plenary sessions, like in St. Louis and Champaign-Urbana, but I was restless and prone to trouble making and

enjoying seeing the Baha'i ne'er do wells who were hanging out at the pinball machines in the bottom of the conference hall.

I'm just throwing out a pastiche because I think each of us as individuals is such a universe unto ourselves which, if we meditate on it, could never be exhausted if we tried to understand ourselves in that way.

After the parents split up I moved to Southern California and went to UCSD and that's when my brain "exploded" so to speak. Also my libido and my social desires. It was a blast and I was on the verge of being kicked out but they gave me a second chance at the school. (I had discovered radio and acting and decided that Physics and Chemistry wasn't for me).

I attribute most of my explosion to Fredriech Nietzsche which was mandatory reading in the Humanities section of things. He was, on the surface, the complete antithesis of all things Baha'i. But everything I read was as if it was a divinely ordained mirror image dealing with the philosophical development of Western Man.

Thing is, I'm kind of smart, but not overly. I'm lazy I think. But I like reading and I love thinking and I'm addicted to pursuing the mystical experience through prayer, and by the same token I'm very much a captive of my ID (though with age and abuse it seems to be tempering itself – kind of – I guess). But no matter what wrong paths I walked, etc. I could never let go of Baha'u'llah.

But don't get me wrong. I did much much mucking around in all kinds of wrong places. And, as I began to understand that even all the "bad crap" was part of me, and that God is actually the "Ever-Forgiving", I began to frame my life of sin and reckless abandon more as a form of amusement for the "inmates of the all highest paradise" and company.

Anyway. Dad died about 10 years ago. Mom's still alive. I feel very blessed to have the parents I have. Even their own relationship dysfunction was a gift that allowed me, like a decadent Buddha, to visit all the worlds of God – even the so-called yucky ones.

I'm currently married. My wife is Baha'i. I've got two beautiful kids . . . and this brings me to "The Little Book".

Yes, let's talk about your individual initiative project Kitab-i-Kuchik. What motivated

you to write it and share it with the world on the web? what is your number one goal or intention?

To be continued in part II of the *Interview With Brian Taraz*…

(don't worry, it is coming very soon)

An Interview With Brian Taraz – part III

If you haven't yet read part I and part II, do so. Here we continue with our next and alas, final installment of Baha'i Rants first interview subject: Brian Taraz. My questions are in **bold** and Brian's answers are in regular font.

I'm curious what your thoughts are about this very medium we are using to communicate to each other and to the rest of the world.

As you know Shoghi Effendi said "**A mechanism of world inter-communication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvelous swiftness and perfect regularity.**" Some see that as a prophecy referring to the internet and believe it to be fulfilled.

What are your thoughts? As Baha'is how should we approach this relatively new medium?

For me the answer is in the foolishness of word play: "Net" and "Web" – One you usually catch fish in. The other a Spider usually spins. So, in spirit, I'm a neo-luddite. My wife, Sarah, has been to me a "techno" – Eve, throwing these computer and cell-phone apples at me, telling me "eat, eat" and so . . . here I find myself, firmly addicted to it all.

So, from my point of view? It's all manifestations of Satan.

brian-taraz-satan-in-forest

But, thanks to Abdu'l-Baha, He says not to have a conflict with even Satan Himself. That's right there in Selections. Given that caveat, I think it's a wonderful, powerful, thing. On the flipside of the above "perception", it is also very literally the "ethereal invisible station" spoken of in the Tablet of the Holy Mariner. And "ethereal" anagrams into "real Thee".

Is not God, after all, disembodied consciousness? And how better for the mind of God to come into its own but through this bizarre, non-existent, medium?

Hasn't God always been virtual anyway? Only realizing Himself in the world of matter through the hands of those who "believed"?
As far as Shoghi Effendi's "prophecy"? I don't "go there" generally on account of the secret booby trap when we speak of Prophecy of any sort is the "projection" on the part of us mere mortals of the idea of causality. Which then ties into the pride associated with thinking that one knows "who is responsible" for the way things are.

Whether a Baha'i romanticizes that all this electricity and light was due to the Bab's Will on account of being deprived of light in Maku, or whether this inter-connected communication has manifested itself as a "fruit" of the will of Baha – it all comes to the same.

I, generally, disagree with everything on principle. Namely – we imagine that "television" has some good potential if it is used properly. I say that "television" is an anagram for "It's Evil One" and that, going back to the descriptions in the writings, Television satisfies Evil One quite nicely. Same with internet. Same with Electricity. The fundamental statement of Faith is found in "Rely upon God".

Never mind asteroids and nuclear holocausts, earthquakes and tsunamis, or even the advent of Lucifer himself – Just imagine that "electricity" stopped working tomorrow. Poof! Just like that. For all our smarty-farty self-esteem as "evolved" and enlightened man, we still don't know the "why" of electricity. But everything, everything, everything we cherish is contingent on its continuing to work as it has worked for, what? The last 200 years max?

In the meantime, however, here it is – the web and stuff. And I've certainly enjoyed it and communicating with people and sharing music, and filling my brain with Wiki knowledge, and a million digital family pictures.
My self is absolutely rabid with its level of enjoyment.

brian-taraz-myspace.png
Click the above image to hear more of Brian Taraz's music

But what Baha'is "ought" to do viz. the web? I've got no idea. The only "definite" thought I have, something that I can say I "know" for me, with certainty, is that without the internal,

heartfelt, mind-encompassed foundation of the Bible and Koran, it's all fairly futile. And there's not much I can do about it, or should do about it, because God, the Baha'i God, is the same Jehovah God, Who is an extremely fickle, self-absorbed, generous-as-hell but don't piss Him off, jealous God and He wants to be LOVED.
Above all else.

And the law articulated by the Bab still obtains; "love and compassion, not force and coercion" is the way to "guide" someone to the Divine Unity. But that's a hell of a sticky wicket. And argumentation, and the use of logic, with the best of intentions, is still a manifestation of "force" and of "coercion".

Its like what the House explained in the Promise of World Peace back in the day. That besides physical expressions of violence, nations could still be violent through economic and political means. And that that is equally bad (not a bad thing for us to meditate on internally, as a community, as we roll out these number driven, pragmatically minded, attempts at disseminating the message of Baha'u'llah.).

If I may tangent again . . . it's like "judgment". We know, according to the hidden word, that we ought not to judge others so long as thou art thyself a sinner. Well, if we say our prayers (which put God's Words in our mouth so that hopefully someday a lightbulb will go off in our heads) we'll hear ourselves constantly calling ourselves "sinners" – even as Baha'is.

Yeah, there's no "original sin" and we're created noble, but like 2 seconds after that – ZOOM – we're in sinner land along with everybody else. Anyway . . . so we shouldn't judge, right? Well, in my humble opinion, I believe most of the believers, and even any normal person, would "presume" that that means not to judge "negatively". But I disagree.

I think it is equally valid for when one makes the statement that something is "good". Seems benign enough, but implicit in a judgment of "good" is the

ability to judge "good" from "bad". And so, no matter how humble and lowly and sweet and hospitable the person is – to my way of thinking – they're "accursed of God". I know it sounds extreme but, in all humble moderation, God is extreme! The most Extreme of the Extreme.

Or He wouldn't have gone out of His way to send His Son and have Him crucified. Know what I mean? Or have His Holiness the Bab La Machine Gunned to give us Baha'is a nice "story". The Bab really took some amount of bullets. Whether 10, 100 or 750 makes no difference. One is more than enough for me, thank you.

So – the way I work it is "I like this" and "I don't like this". I exercise my rights of "sovereignty" over this dust heap called Brian Taraz, to choose things I like and don't like to do. But, and that's why people don't invite me to parties too much or solicit my opinion often, I can't really tell you about "good" and "bad".

That's like with my book. In the middle there somewhere is Krishna in his multi-headed soul devouring form. Now me? I like stuff like that. I've crawled into the pit and ripped my psyche many new orifices in my attempt to figure out this whole "thing". But it's not for me to impose it on anyone, or even to try to sneakily lure someone into such a thing.

But there are people who long for the spiritual battle. They yearn for the bridge of Sirat and are at the same time as interested in the yawning gulf and flames below as they are in the "other side". And I think that this Internetscape and Web of dreams totally qualifies as a literal manifestation of that "Placeless" place which is referenced in the Hidden Words.

A very fast growing and dynamic part of the Baha'i internet are Baha'i blogs. Which ones have you visited, found interesting? what do you think in general about this whole 'blogging' phenomena and Baha'i bloggers?

Like you, with Baha'i Rants. I think it's awesome. I've seen Cormorant Baker and the Baha'is On-line site. I've seen some other things here and there and, because I'm Baha'i-centric in the extreme, I love it. Whether they're coming from an angry space, or a cheeky space, or hurt space . . . . it's still orbiting Baha.

Now, of course, I've come across some Covenant-Breaker sites. And, well, "I didn't like them". They didn't creep me out, they didn't give me heebie-jeebies, they just didn't resonate with my peculiar spiritual aesthetic sensibility. But I love BR – the web page, its cleanliness, its frankness. But then there are a ton of articles, and my great challenge is that I have made a commitment to hyper-myopia.

The goal, the point, the apex, the height, the depth of all-in-all, is the Word of God. And so, as I see Baha'i threads and websites, from whichever angle, I'll check things out a second but A) since I'm no one in particular, whatever I think or feel doesn't seem to be of much importance and B) within my own puffed up sense of delusion, I find that I yearn for scripture time more than anything. And my time is severely limited mostly due to C) I've got two kids (3 and 6) , I'm married, 44, barely economically functional but living in the good old U.S. of Mammon and so I barely can keep the lower-reality at bay.

If you spend anytime online, you're bound to run into one or more of the 'hot button' issues. You know, like women on the Universal House of Justice, the Baha'i stance on homosexuality, Ruhi, pre-publication review, incumbancy in Baha'i elections, etc… What are your thoughts?

As far as the "hot-button" issues? "Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision: for the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision". That's from Chapter 3 in the book of Joel. It's one of the Valleys not listed in the "Seven Valleys" See, that's my problem. I read chapter 3 and to me it describes current Baha'i/American/Global reality. And so these "issues of concern"?

I've got my answers for them. My humble opinion. But I've developed them, or they've emerged, as a result of doing that Read. And so, I could just spit it out – as a one line answer. A sound bite. And so? It starts a whole nother tangential vector away from the "point" of this whole affair – which is to somehow draw the hearts of men to their "Lord". And the drawing of the heart is a function of Love. And Love is the Cause of creation, and the Creation was not generated by God's reason.

Reason, mind and intellect are gifts and faculties bestowed by God as a mercy. Because He created us out of Chaos and madness and jealousy and – in a word – LOVE. That's the Big Bang (ask any adolescent – how sadly we forget the power). And so – Women on the house of Justice? Will be clear as the noonday sun? I'll give a clue to my point of view.

brian-taraz-with-guitar.pngAt the beginning of the Adamic cycle God told Abraham to do something to the guys' private bits. Everybody. Well we're older now so, that little tinkering doesn't need to be done. But maybe, since this is all about the ultimate final inversion, what if, since the rulers of the world are really supposed to be the servants of mankind – What if, in order to be a ruler, a certain sacrifice was needed? A token. Just as always. An actual sacrifice. It used to be bulls

Homosexuality? I believe it is divine. The love between the Bab and Baha'u'llah is essentially homo-erotic. But that from a "western" limited mind. The East has always had male/male "love" – and even tinged with eros.

But then there's the sacred, inviolable three chastity pages of ADJ. Well … . people want to see what they want to see. Like I ask in the book – is taking a "shower" nudism? Do the truly righteous bathe with a robe on? And so we're still immature as I see it, and its okay.

We speak loftiness and global vision, social and economic issues, political will and concerted action . . . but we still tremble at the thought of our pee-pees and poops. Till we figure out the "divinity" inherent in these we will get nowhere.

Well . . . there you have it Baquia. I might as well bury myself now and be done with it. But that's why I'm just happy as a clam with being a Haifan Baha'i and obeying the House, and keeping my mouth shut (unless an intrepid blogger hits me up for an interview) – its because, it's writ large in every single scripture – except ours. Our destiny – the Baha'i Faith Inc. – is writ throughout the Bible and the Koran, and in the Upanishads and Bhagavad-Gita and . . . .to speak truth . . . it doesn't look pretty. Think of this Faith as one big "Isaac" about to be "sacrificed" on the top of Carmel.

Right by the Cave of Elijah. God, Baha'u'llah, Whomever is very definitely NOT being subtle. But willful blindness is a very, very hard habit to break. And me? I'm just going down with my peeps. Because this is, in truth, the One True Faith of God. And like we ask in the song, "Would you give your life, for Baha'u'llah?" Would you risk your soul?

But in the grand scheme of things my true belief about the Faith is that it's not about "right". It's about something else. It's about a love so powerful and vibrant, eternal and divine, that it can take right and wrong, and good and bad, and friend and enemy and mutate them into some other realm of being in which these terms make no sense and aren't referenced.

To use Nietzsche's title – To go beyond Good and Evil. So . . . I wanted to share that with you because the beauty of your passion for truth and clarity in service to Baha'u'llah is wonderful. And I don't want you to think that if I don't try harder it isn't because I don't care intensely. I sense that you can already sense that that is not the case.

It's just that I take all of this way seriously and I know that what looks like even a small action "out there", in that illusion that extends past our fingertips, eyes and noses, reverberates like that storied "butterfly" of Chaos theory which flaps its wings and triggers a monsoon half-way across the world.

This is quantum faith. And I yearn to be a Baha'i Urban Mystic (B.U.M.) who is seeking to understanding the mysterious power of the Lord of Hosts who, with the simple wiggling of His Pen in the Land of Mystery managed to topple long-standing empires.
It's about kissing God in the soul of the other with a single breath and applying just the right drop of elixir from the Medicine Chest of the All-Knowing Physician.

I want to say "Be" . . . .
And then watch it "Be".
Lots of love
From B
To B

Thank you Brian. Thank you very much.

Annual Report from NSA of Canada

The annual report from the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada finally made it's way through snail mail. Unlike the speedier US counterpart (sent through the electronic intertubes) it is very bland.

The only interesting part is where they mention their new approach to the budget:

> A continued challenge this year has been in maintaining sustained, generous response to the needs of the Funds of the Faith. Although contributions fell short of what was called for in the budget, in a wonderful development in the past month, efforts by institutions and individuals alike appear to have eliminated the current year's operating deficit and also allowed a reduction in the accumulated deficit to approximately $650,000. Having sought the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, ***the National Spiritual Assembly decided this year to establish an expenditure budget equal to the actual contributions to the National Fund over the last three years***, resulting in deep cuts to services and staff at every level.

The emphasis above is mine.

So it appears that the NSA has finally decided to join the rest of us in reality. I'm loath to take credit for this but you may remember this blog performed a service to NSA treasurers and made them watch this presentation. Atleast the Canadian treasurer seems to have grasped the complex financial machinations explained in that video.

So in effect what they've done is look at the previous 3 years and averaged the contributions received for the National Fund. They've then set this as their budget for next year. This seems reasonable since contribution trends change little year over year. The NSA has attempted for many years to try and pull up the contribution levels by sheer force of setting higher goals.

This simply does not work. And it seems they have realized the folly of setting unrealistic expectations, not meeting them and then brow beating the Baha'is for "their" failure.

For example, last Baha'i year the goal was $5.4 million for the National Fund. Actual contributions were $4.3 million. But with the new method, next year's goal (the 3 year average of actual contributions to the National Fund) will be $3.6 million. Seems like they've made some real changes.

But not so fast!

While the National Fund's goal is set at $3.6 million, they've done something very sneaky to actually create no change! Here's what the NSA did. They introduced a line on the budget statement called "Additional Goal for National Fund". This had a value of $2.1 million.

So if we take the realistic goal of $3.6 million and add to it this mysterious "*Additional Goal*" of $2.1, we get…. (drum roll)… $5.7 million.

Which is right back in the range of $5.4 million (from previous years!)

In effect, no change. Plus ca change and all that. I had no idea the NSA were fans of French existentialism 😉

Here's what it looks like:

National Fund_____$3,573,263
Additional Goal for National Fund_____$2,151,737
Total_____$5,725,000

And no, there's no explanation given as to what, exactly, this additional goal is for. Or why it is needed. And I'm sure it is just coincidence that it is exactly the amount that is needed to bring the budget up to a round number level at which it would show no real change from last year (except for a slight **increase**).

Such sleight of hand tricks like, saying you're reducing the budget,while in actuality increasing it are the forte of the NSA and its treasury department. After all, they've been reporting a deficit year after year to the Baha'i community and a surplus to the government year after yea.

This is why we need more transparency and openness in the Baha'i Administration. This is why more and more Baha'is are reluctant to donate to the Funds. Would you give money to a charity that plays these sort of tricks? insists on opacity and obfuscation? refuses to answer simple questions?

Another Victory for Incumbency

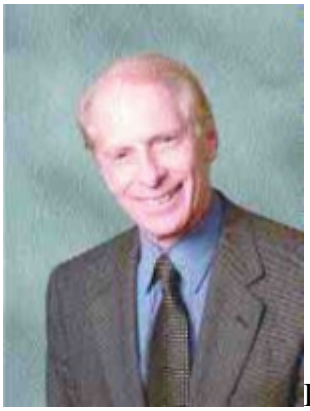
During the festival of Ridvan, Baha'is all over the world hold their national conventions. Inside, pretty much the same delegates gather as they have in previous years, they eat the same sort of snacks and give the same sort of empty speeches and finally, they hold elections for the new National Spiritual Assembly members.

Through a very similar process, the new NSA of Canada was elected yesterday morning. And I use the word 'new' rather loosely. Of the 9 members from the previous NSA, 8 were re-elected. The one member that wasn't re-elected was long time NSA member and treasurer, Husayn Banani.

Mr. Banani (below) was afforded an ~~un~~official retirement (there is an understanding that he will not be reelected) and given two standing ovations as thanks for his multi-decades of hard work and dedication to the Baha'i AO.

In his place, Dr. David Smith was elected as the ninth member. If that name is familiar, it is because it is the same Dr. David Smith that just retired a few weeks ago as a Continental Board of Counsellor for propagation – a position he had held for a dozen or so years.

Having hardly stepped out of the appointed arm of the AO, Dr. Smith has now entered the elected arm in a big way. He will have to juggle his duties as a member of the NSA with those of being on the LSA of Toronto.


Dr. Smith (right) is a pediatric ophthalmic surgeon at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto and an assistant professor at the University of Toronto's School of Medicine. He is a member of the Breakwell Education Association, which intends to establish the Stratford College of Liberal Arts. Before becoming a Baha'i Dr. Smith was a Christian and *an elder* in his Church.

Baha'i Rants wishes them all the best of luck and hopes that their dry-cleaners are up for the Herculean task of removing the stench of incumbency from their hallowed robes.

UPDATE: Dr. David Smith resigned from his position as a member of the LSA of Toronto, to serve on the NSA of Canada.

Appeal Court Decision: US NSA Loses (Again)

Back in January the NSA of the Baha'is of the US brought forward contempt charges against the Orthodox Baha'is based on a +40 year old injunction. After a lengthy hearing, the US NSA lost the case as the judge ruled that the injunction didn't apply to the current

Orthodox Baha'i organization. The US NSA (against the better judgement of this humble blogger) decided to appeal that ruling to the United States Court of Appeals (7th Circuit).

The most recent ruling has finally come after many months of deliberations by the appeal judges. The verdict? Again, a ruling against the US NSA. For the full decision, see the bottom of this post.

For those caught unawares of this whole melodrama, allow me to offer you a recap of the action:

In 1966 Mason Remey and the NSA Under the Hereditary Guardianship brought forward a case agains the NSA of the Baha'is of the US. They were attempting to wrest control of the Wilmette temple and assets from the NSA. They lost but the NSA followed up with a counter litigation strategy that sued them for infringing on the "Baha'i" trademark.

The court found in the favor of the NSA and ruled that Mason Remey's organization couldn't use the name Baha'i as that belonged to the NSA. I made fun of this ruling because it defies any and all legal precedent as well as good old common sense. In summary, it has no validity since you can not trademark common terms like Christian, Jew, Baha'i, Muslim, etc. Various factions, like for example the Protestant and Catholic churches use the common term of "Christian" or "church" with equal freedom.

Fast forward to 2006. The US NSA decided to unearth the injunction against Remey from 1966 and apply it to the Orthodox Baha'i organization. There is an important distinction here. The case being argued was not regarding the validity of the trademark claim of the NSA (because everyone knew that was non-existent) but rather the case was whether the injuction from 1966 applied originally to Mason Remey's organization would be valid and relevant to the current Orthodox Baha'i organization.

The NSA of the Baha'is of the US argued that it did. The Orthodox Baha'is that it didn't because they were a distinct and separate organization. The NSA obviously knew that their case would not be worth anything if it was based on the 1966 trademark ruling so they simply attempted to have the previously applied injunction towards Remey's organization applied to the Orthodox Baha'i organization. But they failed to prove (twice) that the 1966 ruling applied to the defendants.

The judge ruled in their favor and against the NSA – both times. Here are some interesting excerpts from the ruling:

> …civil authorities may not make judgments about religious controversies when deciding church property disputes. Kedroff, 344 U.S. at 116. (The church-autonomy principle recognized in Watson "must now be said to have federal constitutional protection as a part of the free exercise of religion against state interference.").
> Building on Kedroff, the Supreme Court held in Presbyterian Church that "the First Amendment severely circumscribes the role that civil courts may play in resolving church property disputes. 393 U.S. at 449. The Court acknowledged that "[c]ivil courts do not inhibit [the] free exercise of religion merely by opening their doors to disputes involving church property." Id. But "First Amendment values are plainly jeopardized when church property litigation is made to turn on the resolution by civil courts of controversies over religious doctrine and practice." Id. The "[First] Amendment therefore commands civil courts to decide church property disputes without resolving underlying controversies over religious doctrine.
>
> Considered in light of these First Amendment limitations on the court's authority, certain aspects of the 1966 injunction are troubling. The decree declares that "there is only one Baha'i Faith," that Shoghi Effendi was its last Guardian and none has come since, and the National Spiritual Assembly was its representative and "highest authority" in the United States and was "entitled to exclusive use of the marks and symbols of the Faith," including the exclusive use of the word "Baha'is." Declarations of this sort push the boundaries of the court's authority under Kedroff and Presbyterian Church. In church property disputes (trademark suits obviously qualify), the First Amendment limits the sphere in which civil courts may operate. When a district judge takes sides in a religious schism, purports to decide matters of spiritual succession, and excludes dissenters from using the name, symbols, and marks of the faith (as distinct from the name and marks of a church), the First Amendment line appears to have been crossed.

The current decision ends with (pg 39):

> The district court treated the trademark-registration filings as nonbinding evidentiary admissions rather than binding judicial admissions… The National Spiritual Assembly apparently agrees with this characterization, but argues that the court gave them insufficient weight. We find no fault with the district court's treatment of this factual matter. Other than the version of spiritual-leadership succession described in trademark filings, the National Spiritual Assembly offered no evidence of a link between Remey and the Second International Council or Baha'is Publishers. Indeed, Remey had no involvement in either organization and died more than 25 years before the Second International Council was established. Neither the Second International Council nor Baha'is Publishers received any money, property, or other assets from Remey or the Hereditary Guardianship. On these facts the district court properly concluded that the Second International Council and Baha'is Publishers are not successors to Remey.

Honestly, I'm embarrassed for the NSA of the US. The outcome is not surprising at all and it comes at a great price. Both financially and prestige wise. There is already media attention covering the decision which naturally is not flattering for the NSA.

I'm at a loss to imagine what could possibly possess the NSA to take up this quixotic adventure. The only explanation is that it was done with the guidance of the UHJ/ITC who, being far removed from the US, have little familiarity with the fundamental legal landscape they entered. I'm saddened to see the precious attention and funds of the Faith being spent in such a disastrously destructive manner.

Even had the NSA won and was able to apply the 1966 injunction against the current Orthodox Baha'i organization, it would have been for naught as the injunction itself would have been voided immediately after being challenged by them. The law does not allow for terms in the public domain to be trademarked or copyrighted. This is why no one can lay claim to the word "chair" or "desk" or "Christian" or the symbol of the cross, etc. I'm astonished that the NSA made such a foolhardy decision to go ahead and waste their time and the funds of the Faith in such a manner. They either had the most incompetent legal representation who failed to inform them of this very basic and fundamental legal fact or they were informed and chose to ignore it and forge ahead nevertheless.

I'm not sure which possibility is more palatable.

For the full decision, see below (No. 08-2306 Argued February 20, 2009 — Decided November 23, 2010):

Archival Video of Hands of the Cause of God (Part 1)

Here is the first installment of six archival videos titled “Golden Memories”. This one features Leroy Ionas, Dorothy Baker and a dapper young William Sears. You get an idea of how old the video is when Sears points to the center of the Baha’i Faith in “Haifa, Palestine”.

Enjoy!

Watch the rest:

Part 1
Part 2
Part 3
Part 4
Part 5
Part 6

Archival Video of Hands of the Cause of God (Part 2)

Here is the second installment in the Golden Memories series. It takes place in and is about the Rizvan (Ridvan) Garden. Mr. Abu’l-Qasim Faizi talks about the special significance of the garden. This was a small walled plot of land close to Bahji and was named after the

garden in Baghdad where Baha'u'llah proclaimed His station as a Prophet. There is even a small clip of the old water pump being worked by a donkey.

Enjoy!

Watch the rest:

Part 1
Part 2
Part 3
Part 4
Part 5
Part 6

Archives Building Undergoing Restoration

More than two years ago, while discussing Baha'i buildings inside Talisman9 (the oldest online Baha'i discussion group), one person wrote:

> Marble construction has the effect of minimising running costs at the price of a higher capital investment. Perhaps
> there are achitects among us who can give us an amortisation estimate:considering that the World Centre is intended to serve the Cause for roughly one thousand years, longevity of construction (and design) is an important consideration.

To which I replied:

Marble is durable – under the right conditions. Those conditions do not exist in Haifa. This is a port city which has a lot of industrial pollution. As well, it houses an oil refinery right at the foot of the mountain which spews strong and corrosive chemicals. Carrarra marble is among the finest, most expensive marbles there is. For Pete's sake! Michaelangelo's David is carved from it. I am no expert but to use it and other expensive forms of marble in such a hostile condition, not only leaves the project managers and architects open to charges of incompetence; it is simply criminal to flush so much money down the drain.

As you probably know, the Archives building is the oldest structure on the Arc. Designed by Mason Remey, it was started in late 1954 and finished in 1957 (and it 'only' cost $250,000 then – the equivalent of $2 Million now). So it has been standing for less than 50 years. The outside columns are built from Chiampo marble, by the way. Sadly, I have seen the erosion taking place with my own eyes. The marble is flaking in large chunks (about double the size of your thumbnail).

We're talking about less than 50 years here! I've seen ugly red-brick apartment buildings that have withstood time with more grace.

I'm just a lay person, but a Baha'i who is an expert (PhD chemistry) told me that in their estimate, in less than 30 odd years all the buildings now put up will have to undergo major renovation or be completely rebuilt (facades). This is excluding the Archives building which will probably undergo such treatment much, much sooner.

The good news is that there may be a reprieve coming soon. There are some efforts being made (not allowed to call it lobbying!) to get the refinery to relocate. This is the classical NIMBY principle – not in my back yard. Israel is a tiny country and they don't have a lot of places to tuck in oil refineries. Chances are slim, but if they do relocate it, it may halt the damage to the buildings. If they don't, well…I'd rather not imagine our children having to raise $500 Million to rebuild the Arc.

In any condition, the best thing we can look forward to is a halt to the damage. Removing the refinery and other industrial complexes at the foot of the mountain will not reverse the damage.

****

Just a little over two years after, here is a current picture worth nine thousand words:

Source of Picture: Sholeh who is currently working in Haifa

If you're not familiar with the Baha'i World Center, the picture shows the **Center for the Study of the Text** to the left and to the right in the distance is the **Archives building** wrapped in scaffolding as it undergoes restoration work. Click for the full size picture.

Here is what the Israeli government says about the air quality around Haifa:

In Israel, the most problematic air pollutant, as shown by air quality monitoring carried out since 1970, is sulphur dioxide (SO2). Relatively high concentrations of SO2 emitted for the most part by power plants and oil refineries are routinely monitored in the Ashdod area and the Haifa Bay. One of the reasons for this is the high sulphur content of the heavy fuel oil in use in Israel. The Haifa Bay, with the most intense industrial activity in the country, coupled with the difficult atmospheric dispersion conditions caused by the influence of the Mediterranean Sea and the complex topography of Mount Carmel, is probably the most polluted area in the country, followed by Ashdod as a close second.

****

Of course this will only serve to reopen the debate among Baha'is about the massive scale and decadence of the building projects on Mount Carmel. While local and national communities find themselves lacking the most basic needs for centers, the funds they raise are funneled to Haifa to build marble buildings which are corroded in record time. And which will have to be rebuilt, probably in our lifetime.

Why not kick start the fund raising efforts of the “Arc Project II: Fund Harder”? After all, when you start talking about hundreds of millions of dollars, pretty soon you’re talking real money.

And I’m sure the hungry, poor, downtrodden, and orphans.. you know, the unwashed masses who Abdu’l-Baha just happened to care for personally in His lifetime, don’t mind waiting while we build, rebuild, and restore and then renovate, the Baha’i World Center. They, more than anyone else, know a thing or two about priorities.

Somebody call the Italian quarries stat! In a few decades we’re going to need more of that luscious marble.

Are Religions Going Extinct?

Recently an intriguing research report was published suggesting that in religion has the same chances in the long run as the Dodo bird.

The research was presented to the American Physical Society meeting in Dallas and was authored by Daniel M. Abrams Haley A. Yaple and Richard J. Wiener. For the mathematically minded and truly curious, you’ll find the full document below.

For the rest, here’s a quick summary and explanation. The foundation of the research is quite simple. The “network effect” is a widely observed non-linear phenomena that posits that the value of a group or network increases with the number of individuals within that group.

There are a myriad applications of the network effect. The most intuitive for us to understand is language. Languages are living breathing things that are born, change, evolve and ultimately die. The popularity of a specific language, say English, varies according to the value that it offers the person who speaks it.

There is little value to be gained by learning to speak a language that few speak. But much to be gained if we learn a language that opens doors around the world. As the group of English language speakers grows, so does the value of learning to speak English. And so, with each new English speaker that joins the group, the network effect creates a virtuous feedback loop increasing the utility of English.

The reverse can also be observed as a language is abandoned. Once enough people stop using it, the network effect goes into reverse and it declines quite rapidly as it loses value in a non-linear fashion. In fact, Abrams, one of the authors of this research study applied a similar model to language in a study published in 2003.

We can also observe the network effect in many online communities. For example, the incredible rise and popularity of social networks like twitter and facebook. As well as the quick death of myspace (as people migrated to facebook and others).

The findings of this recent research study are based on this simple concept and they show that in a number of countries, the future will belong to the "non-affiliated" group. In other words, those that have no religious or denominational affiliation – agnostics or atheists.

These countries are Australia, Austria, Canada, the Czech Republic, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Switzerland.

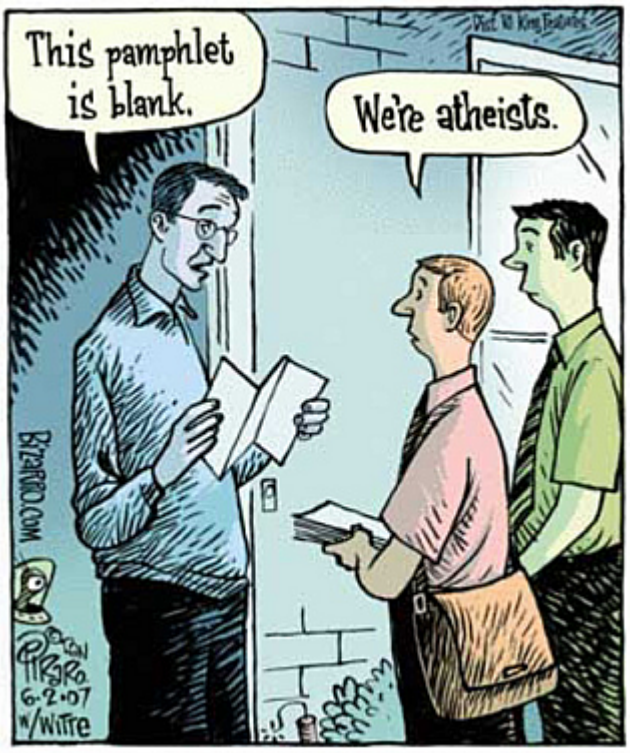
You might notice that these countries have something in common. They are all secular liberal democracies located in the economically advantaged areas of the world. As the Pew study from a few years ago showed already, the level of religious conviction is directly related to financial wealth.

According to this recent study, if the same trends persist, then non-affiliated will be the majority in these countries. In Canada it will be 61% by 2050. According to the latest census data, unaffiliated persons in Ireland represent 4.2% of the population (2006 data). Back in 1961, they were a puny 0.04% of the population. Currently, in the Netherlands,

those claiming non-affiliated status number 40% and the highest level of non-affiliation belongs to those beer guzzling heathens, the Czechs.

Niels Bohr, the famous physicist and Yogi Berra are both quoted as saying “It’s hard to make predictions, especially about the future.”

This is after all just an extrapolation based on a sensible model and the best available data. It is in no way a guarantee that this is how the future will unfold. But I must confess that I do find it amusing to imagine a future where religion and atheism switch places.



Can you picture it?

We’ll have ‘heretics’ tied to the stake and forced to listen to a monotone recitation of “On the Origin of Species”. Brace yourself to be disturbed during dinner by atheists who knock on your door to share with you the good news of the scientific method. Worse yet, imagine enduring cries and moans of “*Friction! Oh friction!*” coming through the wall during a rather energetic bout of love making by your atheist neighbors.

The horror… the horror.

Bacquet in Nova Religio

The May 2006 edition of *Nova Religio* has an article by Karen Bacquet titled *When Principle and Authority Collide: Baha'i Responses to the Exclusion of Women from the Universal House of Justice*.

Nova Religio is a prestigious academic publication from the University of California. It it published four times a year and presents examinations of alternative religious movements.

Karen's essay, as the title suggests, explores how Baha'is deal with the collision of the principle of the equality of men and women and the present day exclusion of women from membership in the UHJ.

This is a worthy topic because to outsiders it is glaringly obvious and simply unexplainable. Baha'is on the other hand tend to usually consider it a taboo topic and at best brush it aside with an empty and hastily composed platitude. Which is probably why it has been an unexplored area in Baha'i theology. And why it took an unenrolled Baha'i to take the first steps in opening a dialogue on this topic.

NOVA
RELIGIO
NR
The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions
VOLUME 9
NUMBER 4
MAY 2006
Michael W. Homer
Seeking Primitive Christianity in the Waldensian Valleys: Protestants, Mormons, Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses in Italy
Karen Bacquet
When Principle and Authority Collide: Baha'i Responses to the Exclusion of Women from the Universal House of Justice
Yaakov Ariel
Can Adam and Eve Reconcile? Gender and Sexuality in a New Jewish Religious Movement
Joel E. Tishken
Whose Nazareth Baptist Church? Prophecy, Power, and Schism in South Africa
Review Essay
Iren E. Annus
New Studies in Mormonism
John Bozeman
Conference Updates
Book Reviews

Am I the only one who thinks it odd that some of the most interesting contemporary research being done in Baha'i theology is by persons who are unenrolled Baha'is? or Baha'is that are pushed out as a result of their research?

You can purchase Karen's article for $12 from *Nova Religio* online.

Baha´i Angst

Unless you have been active in Baha´i cyberspace and know about both the ¨official¨and un-official Baha´i stuff that goes on there, the humour and wit of Baha´i Angst will be lost on you (this is probably my favourite btw). And you´ll probably scratch you´re head in confusion and then move on, regretting that you lost those 15 seconds visiting it that you´ll never get back.

Its a bit like appreciating SNL, I guess. If you´ve lived in a cave somewhere for the past couple of years, away from the current events, celebrity news, etc. the satire being showcased in front of you in their skits is simply wasted. So if you don´t want to appear like a dumfounded loser while others are on the floor clutching their guts, get thee to a few archived Baha´i groups (like Talisman, UeB, Beliefnet, talk.religion.bahai, and the like).

But mainly, I write about it for those few hearty souls who *have* been around the block a few times but have yet, somehow, unluckily not tripped onto it by themselves.

Enjoy.

No related posts.

Baha'i Administrative Body of Iran Arrested

Breaking News
Morning Wednesday May 14th, 2008 – Tehran, Iran

Report from the Universal House of Justice

> … the members of the Friends in Iran – the group that coordinates the activities of the Baha'i community in the absence of a National Spiritual Assembly in the Cradle of the Faith – have been summarily and unjustly arrested by the Iranian authorities in raids conducted in the early hours of this morning, 14 May 2008. Details are as follows.
>
> Officers of the Intelligence Ministry in Tehran entered the homes of six of the seven members of the Friends in Iran, whereupon they conducted extensive searches, following which all six were arrested and brought to the notorious Evin Prison in Tehran. These individuals – Mrs. Fariba Kamalabadi [Fariba Kamalabadi], Mr. Jamalu'd-Din Khanjani [Jamaloddin Khanjani], Mr. 'Afif Na'imi [Afif Naeimi], Mr. Sa'id Rida'i [Saeid Rezaie], Mr. Bihruz Tavakkuli [Behrouz Tavakkoli], and Mr. Vahid Tizfahm [Vahid Tizfahm] – now join the

seventh member of the group, Mrs. Mahvash Thabit [Mahvash Sabet], resident of Tehran and Secretary of the Friends in Iran, who has been held in custody since 5 March 2008 when she was summoned to Mashhad by the Ministry of Intelligence, ostensibly on the grounds that she was required to answer questions related to the burial of an individual in the Baha'i cemetery in that city. Contrary to recent indications that Mrs. Thabit would be released some time soon, the events that have transpired today are yet another indication of the government's determination to extinguish the Baha'i community in the land of its birth.

… such dire action on the part of the government has not been witnessed since the heartrending events in 1980 and 1981, when all nine members of the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran were abducted on 21 August 1980 and disappeared without a trace, following which the reconstituted National Assembly was again ravaged by the execution of eight of its members on 27 December 1981.

Related from Baha'i Rants:

Three Baha'is jailed in Iran
Intensifying persecutions in Iran

Return of the Hojjatieh Society

Those “devious” Baha’is

Iran steps up monitoring of Baha’is

Persecution of Baha’is linked to Hojjatieh Society

* * * * * * * * *

I wrote this more than 2 years ago:

> With the arrival of the new president, everyone has noted that Iran’s political situation has taken a very bad turn. Unfortunately most people don’t have even a clue as to the extent nor the underlying reasons. I hope to shed some light in the next paragraphs and once again, show why I believe the UHJ’s policy of encouraging Baha’is to remain in Iran is completely wrong and extremely dangerous.
>
> …
>
> The recent arrests and persecution of Baha’is in Iran are, I’m afraid, only the beginning of a renewed campaign of persecution. Unlike previous administrations in Iran which were reluctantly influenced by international pressure, the perverse ideology to which this one subscribes to allows them to be immune to such forces. Any and all actions taken by the civilized world against the Iranian regime as a consequence of the persecution of Baha’is, will only reinforce the belief system of the Hojatieh and result in their redoubled efforts to sow the seeds of chaos.
>
> I pray that I am completely wrong in my understanding of the situation and wholly ignorant of the real political cross currents in Iran. I pray so because if I am right, many Baha’is are in extreme and imminent danger.
>
> I beg them to get out, for if I am wrong, the consequence is acceptable. They and their families can build a life in one of many civilized countries in the world and simply go back when Iran’s future changes for the better. But if I’m correct, then the consequences of staying in Iran will be tragic.

If a lowly blogger with limited resources can put the pieces together a few years in advance, it is safe to require the UHJ/ITC to have done so years ahead and with a much deeper understanding. Which is why I’m utterly puzzled why this time around the highest

administrative bodies are choosing to do nothing when in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution they were not only encouraging Baha'is to leave Iran but actively involved with helping them re-establish a life outside of Iran.

As Baha'is we have faced many waves of persecution and violence. But it is not within the precepts of our Faith to seek out martyrdom when there is a clear alternative.

Related External Links:

Iranian Human Rights Documentation Center – Press Release
LA TIMES: Blog Post – Babylon & Beyond
US State Department – Press Release
United States on International Religious Freedom – Press Release
United Nations Special Rapporteur: Report on Baha'is in Iran – March 2006

Baha'i Administrative Bureaucracy

It is fun to look at the Baha'i administration through the prism lens of organizational studies. It is rather difficult for a Baha'i to have such knowledge and not indulge. So allow me the indulgence.

Recently Steve featured an article which tried to depict the Baha'i administration as inhabiting the 'sweet spot' inside a theoretical framework of organizational behavior. The theory, in this case, is that organizations are either "spiders" or "starfish". Which is just a cute twist on the old top-down and bottom-up notation most people use. The analogy being that a *starfish* would survive if you cut a limb off (decentralized) whereas a *spider* is centralized. Obviously the analogy is a false one since cutting off a spider's leg won't kill it.

In case, if you're not familiar with these concepts, very simply put, a top-down organization is one in which decisions, policy, culture and pretty much everything that matters is decided at the top and then forced down the line to the last subordinate. The article argues, rather weakly, that the Baha'i organizational structure, has both these elements. While I can empathize with the author as he tries so hard to show the Baha'i administration to be "decentralized" I can't help but notice that he fails rather dramatically. Simply asserting a thing, is not proving it.

This sort of mistake is a conceptual fallacy. Where we start out with the premise that we want to arrive at and then mercilessly torture the data and facts until they fit, mangled and distorted, into the right cubby hole. The scientific approach, is instead, to start with a neutral stance, without any conclusions, and then to look at all the facts and infer from them. Allowing them to lead us to whatever conclusion they may.

If we do look at the facts, we see an almost exclusive top down bureacracy. One that hands down X-year plans, forces the community to take mind-numbing regurgitation classes (Ruhi), appoints and directs all aspects of Baha'i administration, and one which micromanages to a neurotic degree.

A great example of this happened just recently. You remember the surprisingly frank admission of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, right? Well, it would seem that that did not sit right with the House of Justice. So they sent a representative, Ms. **Penelope Walker**, from the (you guessed it) International Teaching Center to the National Convention to set them right.

She kindly informed the delegates that rather than being interested in something as "old world" and impractical as listening to the grass roots and finding out what is really going on (things like facts), the ITC and the House were more interested in them understanding

that nothing is wrong with the plans or guidance given. That they must keep on keeping on. Do Ruhi. And if in doubt, do more Ruhi.

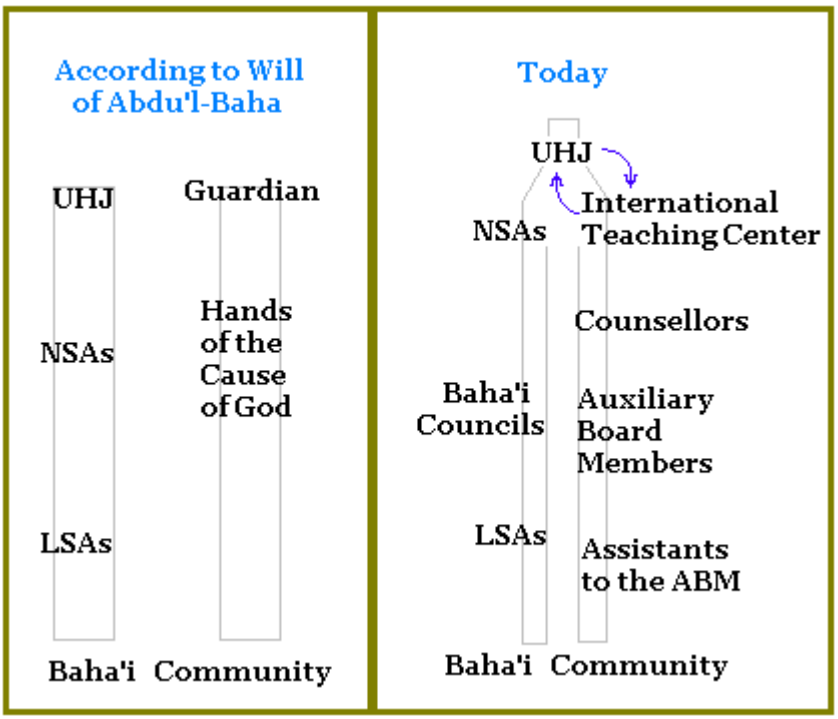
If that doesn't result in anything positive for the community, then it is your fault. You must have done something wrong, or maybe you didn't take Ruhi enough times. Did you do all books? how about in a second language? did you try doing them standing on your head? Aha! You lazy, no good bum!! You're the reason why the enrollments have been shrinking for the past 5 years!

Heaven forbid that the delegates at the National Convention have a discussion of what is truly going on in their communities and gasp! tell it like it is. I mean, whoever suggests that the National Convention is a place for that? Or that the National Assembly would want to listen to their own members rather than a guest flying in from another continent. Obviously the guest has a more intimate knowledge of how the United States Baha'i community is doing than the very Baha'is in that community. Right?

How tenderly and carefully the grassroots are attended to. It is simply breathtaking!

****

It must be noted that the Baha'i administration as we see it today, would not be recognized by its architect, Abdu'l-Baha. In His Will & Testament, the administration is laid out to function with two parallel but separate pillars: the elected institution (Universal House of Justice) and the appointed institution (Guardianship). But that is not what we have today:



The arrows going to and from the House of Justice and the **International Teaching Center** are meant to illustrate the fact that since the early 1980's all new **House of Justice** members have just happened to be current members of the ITC. This revolving door has lead to group think and a drastic narrowing of leadership perspective.

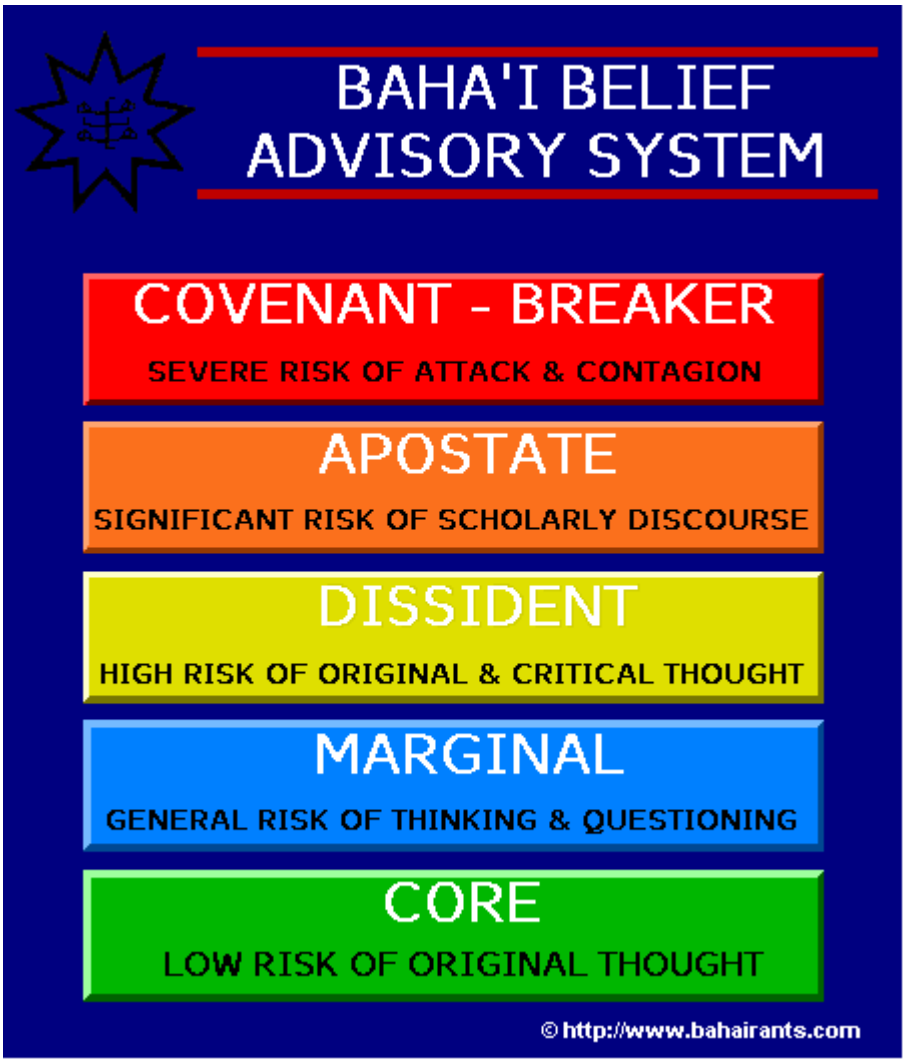
Which reminds me that it's been a good while that I promised part II of the look at Baha'i elections and how we can improve them. I'll be writing about that very soon. Probably tomorrow. Rather apropos as it coincides with the ongoing National Conventions.

Baha'i Belief Advisory System

Inspired by Moojan Momen's recent paper (and the United States Homeland Security), I've drawn up an easy to use chart which should help fellow Baha'is and the institutions in identifying and categorizing members of the community.

Note that each label is directly taken from Momen's recently published paper. [takes out laser pointer and slowly removes glasses for effect]

"Let the name calling and mud-slinging… errr… I mean, ***sociological categorization***… BEGIN!"



So… which are ***you***!?

And here is Comic Book Guy to pronounce his succinct review of Momen's paper:

"Worst. Paper. Ever."

Ouch.

Baha'i Chile Temple Construction: Math Challenge

It has certainly been too long since we discussed the Baha'i Chile temple project. In case this is new to you, here is an introductory video featuring the architect of the building, Siamak Hariri.

As you may recall, in a letter dated April 14 2005, the Universal House of Justice wrote that the cost would be **$27 million** (US dollars) with a **3 year** construction time period:

> Total cost of the project is estimated at twenty-seven million dollars, and the plans now call for its completion within a period of three years.

Anyone with an iota of experience with large construction projects would know that such initial estimates are always far too conservative. Having completed the huge Arc project just a few years ago, I assumed that the UHJ was experienced enough to make that judgement. Therefore, I reserved my caution, hoping for miracle:

> I'm not sure just how realistic the $27 million (or the three year time table) is. Such projects have a tendency to run over-budget, especially in a developing country. But then again, the project team could pull it off without a hitch. I wish them the best.

Of course, things did not go as planned. The Baha'i Chile Temple was not finished in 2008. In fact, the engineering firm of Soheil Mosun hired by the UHJ was able to work out all the kinks in their software (originally intended for aeronautical modeling, not free standing structures like a building) in early 2007. With that in place, the project could proceed to actually starting to fabricate the material.

Fast forward to today and we have news that they are finally putting spades in the ground and begun excavation. This is the very first steps in the long construction process. And it has come 5 years after the purchase of the land and 3 years after the initial completion date (2007-2008). But being behind schedule shouldn't surprise anyone considering the polemic that surrounded the project from the onset.

What should concern Baha'is is the math involved with the construction costs and the funds that have been contributed for the Chile Temple project. Initially the cost estimate was $27 million. The new estimate is $38 million – a 41% increase.

As well, the Universal House of Justice writes in a recent letter that so far, approximately $20 million has been raised, leaving $18 million still to be raised:

However, if we look at information from various National Spiritual Assemblies, it is clear that much more than $20 million has already been contributed.

Consider that the official 2009 annual report from the US NSA includes the following (from page 48):

> *Chilean Temple Initiative* The American Baha'is community has, to date, contributed $12.7 million to the construction of the Mother Temple of South America. It has passionately answered the call of the National Spiritual Assembly to contribute the "lion's share" of the $27 million projected cost of the last of the continental Mashriqu'l-Adhk??rs. Since the last Annual Report over $1 million has been contributed to the Chilean Temple Fund through direct contributions, the Automatic Contribution System, pledges, and "in honor" contributions.

The UHJ asked the US Baha'is to take point in this endeavor and they have performed admirably. The Chile Temple initiative is actually part of the Kingdom Project and the website (chilean-temple.org) is operated by the US NSA.

Back to the numbers: since that was in 2009, if we assume that the same general pace of donations was maintained, then we have the US contributing $12.7 million as well as an additional $1 million since that report in 2009. So that is a total of approximately $13.7 million.

From data available through the Canadian Charities Directorate of the Canadian Revenue Agency, we know that the Baha'i NSA contributed $12.5 million in 2009:

Schedule 2: Activities outside Canada - NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF THE BAHA'IS OF CANADA

For more information about carrying on programs outside Canada see the Charities Directorate website at www.cra-arc.gc.ca/charities

1 What were total expenditures on activities/programs/projects carried on outside Canada during the fiscal period, excluding gifts to qualified donees? **200** $ 12,988,273

2 Were any of the charity's resources provided for programs outside Canada under any kind of an arrangement including a contract, agency agreement, or joint venture to any other individual or entity (excluding gifts to qualified donees)? **210** Yes

If yes, enter the amounts of the total reported on line 200 transferred to these individuals/organizations as required in the following table.

Name of individual/organization	Using the list on the reverse, identify country code where activities were carried on.	**Amount ($)** Please show amounts to the nearest single dollar.
NSA BAHA'IS OF UNITED STATES	US	$ 59,150
NSA BAHA'IS OF CHILE; VARIOUS	CL	$ 12,538,058
VARIOUS NSA'S,PIONEER & TEACHI	QM	$ 391,065

In 2008 the NSA of the Baha'is of Canada sent $2.9 million outside of Canada but it did not breakdown that amount into individual countries so we do not know how much, if any, was destined to Chile. The breakdown that you see above was only introduced in 2010. Likewise in 2007, the Canadian NSA sent $9.8 million outside of Canada. And in 2006, $5 million and finally in 2005 when the Chilean Temple fundraising began, $2.8 million.

So if we give them the benefit of the doubt and assume that none of the amounts from 2005-2008 sent outside of Canada (not even 5%) were destined to Chile for the construction of the Temple and if we again, give them the benefit of the doubt and assume that no other funds since 2009 have been collected and sent for the same purpose, we still have a total of $12.5 million.

With the $13.7 million from the US that is a total of $26.2 million. That amount has already been collected and forwarded to Chile by the US and Canada. Of course, these are just two countries. We are ignoring all of Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, etc. Some countries are wealthier than others and are thus able to contribute much more than others. From travels and my own knowledge of the Baha'i communities, my guesstimate is that the European Baha'i community, while small in number, is very wealthy. Especially Germany, UK, Italy, Spain and France. Even more wealth is focused in

the Middle East. But again, we give the benefit of the doubt here and assume that all these countries have donated zero towards the Chilean Temple project.

With the total of $26.2 we have $6.2 million more than the UHJ writes in their letter above. Where did those $6.2 million go?

That is, instead of $18 million still to be contributed, we really have just $11.8 left to collect to have a sum of $38 million.

And if we do add in some figure for the other countries as well as bringing the total up to reflect donations sent after 2009 until the present, then the difference between the two becomes even larger!

I've tried to base this on known facts but if we expand it to reasonable speculation by removing all the 'benefits of doubt' that were mentioned above, I wouldn't be surprised at all if the total of $38 (or even more!) had already been collected for this project.

Unfortunately, getting an accurate handle on such things is made impossible by the opacity that pervades international Baha'i reporting when it comes to anything to do with finances. At the national level, as you can see, we have some information from NSA annual reports. Some NSA's like Canada, sadly do not respect the Baha'i community that they represent enough to release an annual report. This leaves the obligatory disclosures they must make to the CRA as the only source of real information.

I hope that such discrepancies outlined above do not reflect a culture of incompetence but have some other explanation. The only real way to know that is through transparency and open communication – something wholly lacking today. I'm reminded of what Shoghi Effendi wrote:

> The duties of those whom the friends [Baha'iss] have freely and conscientiously elected as their representatives are no less vital and binding than the obligations of those who have chosen them. Their function is not to dictate, but to consult, and consult not only among themselves, but as much as possible with the friends whom they represent. They must regard themselves in no other light but that of chosen instruments for a more efficient and dignified presentation of the Cause of God. They should never be led to suppose that they are the central ornaments of the body of the Cause, intrinsically superior

> to others in capacity or merit, and sole promoters of its teachings and principles. They should approach their task with extreme humility, and endeavour by their open-mindedness, their high sense of justice and duty, their candour, their modesty, their entire devotion to the welfare and interests of the friends, the Cause, and humanity, to win not only the confidence and the genuine support and respect of those whom they should serve, but also their esteem and real affection. They must at all times avoid the spirit of exclusiveness, the atmosphere of secrecy, free themselves from a domineering attitude, and banish all forms of prejudice and passion from their deliberations. They should, within the limits of wise discretion, take the friends into their confidence, acquaint them with their plans, share with them their problems and anxieties, and seek their advice and counsel.
>
> (23 February 1924 to the Baha'iss of America, published in "Baha'is Administration", p. 64)

This news is brought to you thanks to the contribution of a fellow Baha'i who shared their concerns with Baha'i Rants anonymously. Similar submissions may be made using the contact form or by sending an email to baquia at bahairants dot com.

The only stipulations are that the information (and/or documents) be verifiably factual and relevant to a Baha'i audience.

Baha'i Chile Temple Construction Moves Forward

The Chile Baha'i Temple project may have peculiar mathematical challenges when it comes to funding, but the actual building work is moving forward. Finally.

After multiple delays caused by problems with securing a location as well as general project mismanagement which delayed the project by more than 4 years, Baha'is around the world were recently informed by the Universal House of Justice that actual work was beginning.

> From the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies:

Dear Baha'i Friends,

With joy we announce several major developments in connection with the emergence of the Mother Temple of South America. Two weeks ago the contract for the construction of the foundation of the building and all concrete work was awarded to a reputable firm in Chile. Following the completion of the excavation and grading for the foundation and plaza, work has now begun on the basement, service tunnel, main floor and mezzanine structure, incorporating important features for seismic resistance based on extensive computational modelling and analysis. And today, after several months of evaluation and assessment of alternative bids, the contract for the fabrication and erection of the Temple's complex steel superstructure was signed with a well-known German company.

The skeletal framework will stand thirty metres high and support five hundred tonnes of exterior and interior cladding of translucent cast glass and carved stone. The nine linked sections of the metal structure will be bound together through an intricate anchorage system that will ensure the connections will not detract from the sublime aesthetic effect of the completed design.

May the followers of the Blessed Beauty throughout the world draw inspiration from these recent developments as they exert themselves – sacrificially, generously, unitedly – to contribute to the advancement of the Cause by word and deed.

The Universal House of Justice

Peripheral work on preparing the areas that will develop into the gardens and surrounding grounds were started last year. This included the installation of a 50 cubic foot irrigation water tank along with its pump room and over 600 feet of underground piping.

The contract for the construction of the 50 meter radius foundation was awarded to a Chilean construction firm. The next step after that will be the fabrication and erection of the steel structures engineered by Soheil Mosun on top of ten seismic base isolators that will act to protect the building in case of earthquakes.

Below is a gallery showing some of the recent work undertaken including the installation of a perimeter fence surrounding the temporary onsite construction facilities. You can find the foundation work in the most recent Google Maps images. Zoom into the South East corner of Santiago in the Pe?alol?n commune or type in these GPS co-ordinates: 33°28’35.07″S 70°30’41.86″W.

For more information and to keep up to date with news check out the new Baha’i Chile Temple website

Baha’i Elections – How to Improve Them – part II

First, a bit of news from the Baha’i community of the United States
(click here for original PDF document):

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE
BAH??’??S OF THE UNITED STATES

May 18, 2007

To the American Baha’i community

Dear Baha’i Friends,

With feelings of deep loss, profound admiration, and enduring gratitude, we announce the retirement of Mr. William E. Davis after 21 years of distinguished service as a member of the National Spiritual Assembly. Mr. Davis requested to retire at this time due to family and health concerns. His sterling record during his tenure on the Assembly, as its Treasurer and, later, as its Chairman, was characterized by devotion to principle, clarity of vision, and a true attitude of service.

Our dear brother Bill retires with our love and prayers that the blessings of Baha’u’llah will forever surround him and his precious
family.

The National Assembly will soon issue a call for a by-election.

With loving Baha'i greetings,

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE BAH??'??S OF THE UNITED STATES

Kenneth E. Bowers
Secretary-General

****

So it seems that there will be a change in the membership of the NSA – by force of the fact that an incumbent is retiring after 21 years!! I have nothing against Mr. Davis personally but I do question the sanity of any individual who would occupy a Baha'i institution for more than 2 decades and also the Baha'i community that would put them there year after year.

Which brings me to the exploration of Baha'i elections and why there is this tendency for incumbents to be elected year in and year out. That this is a fact of life for Baha'i communities all around the world is not up for debate. Anyone can verify it with the smallest amount of observation and research. In fact, the incumbency is evident not only globally, but at all levels: local (LSA), national (NSA) and international (House of Justice).

I'll get to how we can hope to get out of this rut but first, why does it exist? Perhaps in understanding the current situation, we will come to some insight.

There are several reasons why this manner of ossification is afflicting the Bahai community. One is that simply being a member of the National Assembly acts as a defacto nomination. The current members are more visible to the community because of their elected role. They travel, visiting outlying communities as well as Haifa when them come back to give talks. In these talks they are introduced as 'NSA member' so and so. Their decisions, either collectively or individually (through an narrow portfolio) gives them a certain cachet other Baha'i individuals do not possess.

In local assembly elections there is similar dynamics at play. Albeit perhaps more implicit. For example, several communities that I have lived in mark the current assembly members names (with an asterisk) on the list of Baha'is eligible for election. Why this is done, I

never understood. But it is undeniable that doing so makes those nine persons stand out from among the names on the list and can influence the outcome.

But I think the most important reason is the nature of Baha'i elections. Because there is no campaigning involved (well, some say the NSA members going around just before Ridvan visiting communities may be seen as a sort of quasi campaigning) and since there are no nominations of candidates, it is very difficult to give a platform to others to simply make them visible to the community. Also, it is mathematically difficult, to the point of impossibility, to 'vote a person' out of office.

Let me explain. You can't vote *against* a person, only for *another* person. And when you vote for someone other than the current members of the assembly, your vote is in all probability diluted to the point of becoming meaningless. This is because more than not, the other members of the community who are voting with you, will not necessarily vote for the same *other* person as you. So what happens is that the same people still get elected but with far fewer votes. Since we do not have a condition where you must be elected by having a certain portion of the votes, theoretically the same 9 people can win with only a tiny fraction of the votes each.

In fact this isn't simply a theory but what is happening right now. I'll use the actual results for the recent LSA election of one of the largest Baha'i communities in North America. There were 1430 eligible voters and 385 ballots cast. While the top person received 205 votes, 3 elected members of the new LSA received less than 85 votes.

If we were to draw a graph to illustrate all the votes it would look something like this:

The leftmost part of the graph (in red) would be those 9 persons who received the most votes. The green part of the graph would be the other members of the community. In fact, the drop off would be much steeper than is shown on this graph.

Sure, part of the problem lies in the small fraction of people who are voting: less than 30% of the community in the example used above. But is this a cause of the problem or a consequence of deeper issues? are people not participating because they feel powerless to have their voice heard? or is it simply apathy? should we blame them or the way the election is organized and administered?

The ways that we can hope to improve Baha'i elections would deal with the dynamic that this graph illustrates. I'll explore specific suggestions and changes that will act to bring other candidates to the fore and "fatten" the tail. Until then, read the simple math behind the incumbency in Baha'i elections.

Baha'i Faith & Homosexuality: It's Getting Better

Demonstrator at the August 2007 anti-gay rally in Kampala, Uganda. Photo credit: Rebekah Heacock.

On January 3rd, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States sent out a letter to the American Baha'i community, quoting parts of a letter from the Universal House of Justice to an individual:

> …With respect to your question concerning the position Baha'is are to take regarding homosexuality and civil rights, we have been asked to convey the following.
>
> The purpose of the Faith of Baha'u'llah is the realization of the organic unity of the entire human race, and Baha'is are enjoined to eliminate from their lives all forms of prejudice and to manifest respect towards all. Therefore, to regard those with a homosexual orientation with prejudice or disdain would be against the spirit of the Faith. Furthermore, a Baha'i is exhorted to be "an upholder and defender of the victim of oppression", and it would be entirely appropriate for a believer to come to the defense of those whose fundamental rights are being denied or violated.
> (Letter from the UHJ to an individual, 27 October 2010)

And further in the same letter:

> [The Bahai Faith] does not see itself as one among competing social groups and organizations, each vying to establish its particular social agenda. In working for social justice, Baha'is must inevitably distinguish between those dimensions of public issues that are in keeping with the Baha'i Teachings, which they can actively support, and those that are not, which they would neither promote nor necessarily oppose. In connection with issues of concern to homosexuals, the former would be freedom from discrimination and the latter the opportunity for civil marriage.

It seems to me that this letter would indicate that the Baha'i community should now not be publicly supporting or opposing actions such as the anti-gay activities in Uganda in 2007.

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Ugandan gays demand freedom

The quest for gay rights is a challenge to Uganda's increasingly authoritarian church and state.

Peter Tatchell
guardian.co.uk, Monday 17 September 2007 21.00 BST
Article history

Ugandan government ministers are demanding the arrest of the country's lesbian and gay human rights activists. Deputy attorney general Fred Ruhinde and minister of ethics and integrity Nsaba Buturo made the call last month in a series of radio broadcasts heard across country.

They are backed by Christian, Muslim and Bahai religious leaders who are calling for all "homos" to be rounded up and locked away.

Above is a screenshot accessed 6 January 2011.

The article in the Guardian shown in the screenshot above continues, lower on the page:

> The rally was organised by the interfaith coalition against homosexuality, an alliance of Christian, Muslim and Bahai organisations.

This wasn't a case of Baha'is just being associated with any interfaith organization but with an association called the **Interfaith Rainbow Coalition Against Homosexuality**. It has been suggested to me that an individual Baha'i got caught up in the events without the knowledge of the local Ugandan Baha'i community. When I first heard the reports, I too thought that, while individual Baha'is are certainly free to participate in activities such as this, Baha'is would not be participating in any representative sense, and newspapers can get things wrong. But how then, did the newspaper reports come to mention the word Baha'i, if this was not the case? Moreover, these reports first appeared a month before the Guardian story in the screenshot, and there were, as far as I know, no statements made from the Baha'i Community in Uganda to indicate that Baha'i representatives were not involved.

World | Wed, Aug. 22 2007 12:22 PM EDT

Hundreds in Uganda Denounce Homosexuality in Wide Protest

By Nathan Black | Christian Post Reporter

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Hundreds of people in Uganda joined rallies on Tuesday to denounce homosexuality, a practice they fear is growing in the largely conservative African state.

(Photo: AP Images / Katy Pownall)
Anti gay protesters hold a rally in

"Homosexuality breaks the laws of God, the laws of nature and the laws of Uganda," said Pastor Martin Ssempa, spokesman for the Interfaith Rainbow Coalition Against Homosexuality, which organized the anti-gay rally in Uganda's capital, according to The Associated Press.

Homosexuality carries a maximum sentence of life imprisonment in Uganda, like in most African states.

Protestors from various religious groups, including Christians, Muslims and Bahai, held signs that read "Homosexuality is crime. That's the law. Keep it." and "God loves homos, he hates homosexuality." They were in Kampala trying to urge the government to uphold the country's ban against what conservatives have called a "repugnant practice" ahead of November's Commonwealth Summit.

Above is a screenshot from The Christian Post. Accessed 12 January 2010.

The following links, all dated in August 2007 and mentioning Baha'i involvement, indicate that it is not likely that the Ugandan Baha'i community was unaware of this association that had been made:

- Interfaith Forum: "Baha'is support Ugandan antigay imprisonment and death penatly laws"
- USA Today: "Ugandans hold anti-gay demonstration"
- Advocate: "Ugandans call for deportation of American journalist covering gay issues"
- MCNBC: "Ugandans seek deportation for writings on gays"
- Washington Post: "Ugandans Hold Anti-Gay Demonstration"
- Pravda: "Ugandans hate gays"
- SF Bay Times: "GLBT Ugandans Launch Media Campaign"
- Talk to Action: "Ugandan Pastor Leads Campaign Against Gay Rights"

Whether this was one individual who joined this anti-gay coalition or not, the 3rd of January letter from the UHJ seems to mean that it is no longer appropriate for Baha'i communities to take an anti-homosexual stance. This has happened in the past, for example when the UK NSA made submission to a London educational advisory committee in 1996, and in 1999 when the Guyana NSA issued a statement against a government bill for equality.

I realise that this new policy of the Universal House of Justice is going to be difficult for some Baha'i communities, in countries where interfaith groups are against homosexuality, as you see in the screenshot below where Baha'is are named as members of the interfaith group.

Guyana religious community condemns gay film festival

Guyana's multi-religious community strongly condemned on Monday a gay an branding promoting homosexuality as a new form of Western colonization.

"We cannot allow the Western world to come and foist their lifestyles and thin simply mean that we are just allowing a newer form of colonialism," said Inter- (IRO) spokesman Juan Edghill, a bishop.

Christians, Hindus, Muslims and Baha'is make up the IRO.

The Society Against Sexual Orientation Discrimination (SASOD), which is org festival, would not immediately comment on the IRO's criticism.

Above is a screenshot from The Voice of Africa, 30 June 2010. Accessed 12 January 2010.

The same report also mentioning the Baha'is by association appears in:

- Carifuna: "Guyana religious community condemns gay film festival "
- World Countries: "Guyana religious community condemns gay film festival"
- Taiwan News: "Guyana religious community condemns gay films"
- CW Mission: "Religious groups denounce gay film festival"
- "Religious Organizations in Guyana Slams Gay Film Festival"
- Link to an article in a newspaper (10 Sept 2010) with arguments for the death penalty and imprisonment for homosexuality mentioning Baha'is as members the IRO: Guyana Times (PDF)

Should Baha'is now remove themselves from interfaith groups which take an anti-homosexual stance? Baha'is have a long history of working with interfaith groups. Rather

than leaving these groups, perhaps Baha'is will be motivated to discourage these groups from acts of discrimination against homosexuals.

However there are other also ways Baha'is can act to remove discrimination, and that is within the Baha'i community itself. In August last year, the North American Association for Baha'i Studies hosted a conference in Vancouver on the theme: "**Rethinking Human Nature**" and there was an extensive line-up of impressive-sounding presentations.

Under the topic "Psychology and Sociology I" was the announcement of this presentation:

> Lynne Schreiber,
> **Rethinking Same-Sex Attraction and General Principles of How to Overcome It**
>
> The fact that some people experience same-sex attraction as unwanted and take measures to overcome it remains somewhat hidden from society, including much of the mental health profession. Shedding light on this process may be encouraging news to those who struggle with such attraction. Understanding the complex factors that commonly shape same-sex attraction unlocks the possibility to conceptualize a new framework for growth.

There's nothing wrong with an individual expressing their views at a Baha'i conference, although I wonder if a person would have been allowed to present the view that homosexuality does not need to be overcome.

Lynne Schreiber ABS 2010

However what drew my attention to this presentation was the fact that a handout she presented had been taken up by at least one American ABM (while the Baha'is do not have clergy, a person in this role has a function akin to a counsellor, and while his or her advice is not mandatory, some Baha'is would give it great weight) in his mission to put pressure on Baha'is who are gay in his area. Moreover Lynne Schreiber is giving presentations and workshops, I assume on how to 'overcome' being gay, in Baha'i communities in various locations in the US.

Again, one could argue that this is not discrimination. That it is not discrimination to promote the view that people need to change their orientation. I would disagree. But allow me continue.

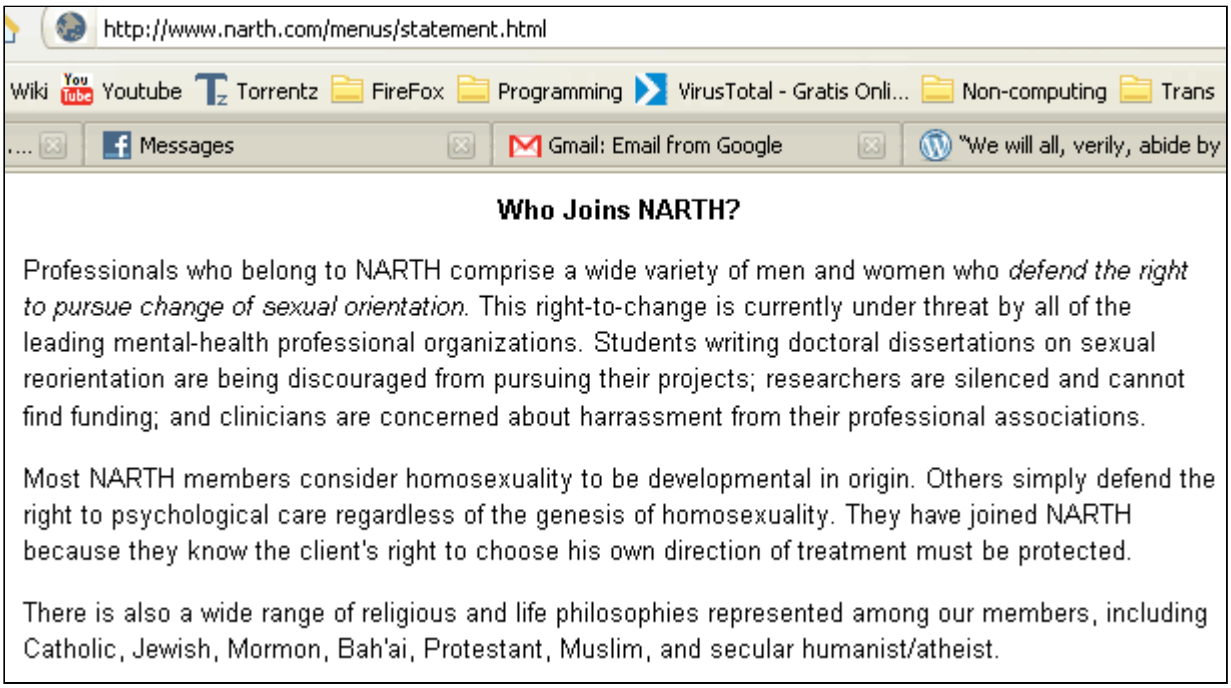
Her handout is here and the quotations from the Baha'i writings in relation to morality, obedience and the importance of independent investigation do not refer to homosexuality. But she has placed these here as if there is some connection with homosexuality. Her handout also includes some quotations from the UHJ, such as:

> …the Faith does not recognize homosexuality as a 'natural' or permanent phenomenon. Rather, it sees this as an aberration subject to treatment
> (to an individual, 22 March 1987)

and I wonder if she used such statements as support for reparative therapies or not. Then what caught my eye were the links at the end of the handout to organizations associated with extreme right-wing political agendas such as Exodus International and in particular to NARTH (National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuals), which advocates what I would consider barbaric reparative therapies. And while some readers here might think that providing conversion therapy to a five-year-old "prehomosexual" boy is an extreme case, this unfortunately is just one of many many examples in this article.

A summary of the unscientific methodologies of NARTH and their activities can be seen on this webpage.

So then I went to the NARTH website to see for myself and was surprised to see that Baha'is were mentioned as members.


http://www.narth.com/menus/statement.html
Wiki
Youtube
Torrentz
FireFox
Programming
VirusTotal - Gratis Onli...
Non-computing
Trans
Messages
Gmail: Email from Google
"We will all, verily, abide by
Who Joins NARTH?
Professionals who belong to NARTH comprise a wide variety of men and women who defend the right to pursue change of sexual orientation. This right-to-change is currently under threat by all of the leading mental-health professional organizations. Students writing doctoral dissertations on sexual reorientation are being discouraged from pursuing their projects; researchers are silenced and cannot find funding; and clinicians are concerned about harrassment from their professional associations.
Most NARTH members consider homosexuality to be developmental in origin. Others simply defend the right to psychological care regardless of the genesis of homosexuality. They have joined NARTH because they know the client's right to choose his own direction of treatment must be protected.
There is also a wide range of religious and life philosophies represented among our members, including Catholic, Jewish, Mormon, Bah'ai, Protestant, Muslim, and secular humanist/atheist.

Above is a screenshot of the NARTH statement page, last updated 19 May 2008. Accessed 11 January 2010.

Since this page was last updated on 19 May 2008, this support has been on public show for over two years now, making it unlikely that various Baha'i communities are unaware of this. I hope this is removed in the near future, as I interpret this as the Bahai community taking sides by associating themselves with an organization that not only is geared towards 'curing' gays but makes clear statements that homosexuality is wrong.

The Baha'i policy as I see it, is that gays should be celibate, that is not the same as saying gays need to be cured or that they are wrong.

Whether individuals who are Baha'is are members of NARTH is another matter. We are free to use our conscience along with our own understanding of the Baha'i Teachings to guide our actions as individuals. For example Baha'is vote as individuals, we may even tell others who we voted for and discuss this, but we do this as individuals. The Baha'i community doesn't take a particular position. And likewise some Baha'is might individually support same-sex marriage as a positive thing while other Baha'is would not.

What the 3rd of January letter implies is that gays who are married shouldn't be discriminated against and that gays are to be treated just as heterosexuals are treated except that the Baha'i community is not to be seen as taking any position for or against same-sex marriage.

The implication of the January 3rd letter is that the area of same-sex marriage is to be treated like the issue of party politics. So the Baha'i position could be, that it does not take any particular position but adopts what the law of the land or that state has as its policy. I say could be, because we have a long way to go as a Baha'i community to work on the prejudice against homosexuality that currently dominates Baha'i discourse. Here are two examples of what I mean by this apart from Lynne's presentation at a Baha'i conference.

An essay by Sam G. McClellan, M.D., "**Some reflections on the Baha'is Teachings as they relate to homosexuality.**" (Prepared in consultation with the Institute on AIDS, Sexuality and Addictions) which used to be on the BNASAA (Baha'is Network on Aids, Sexuality, Addictions, and Abuse website, argues for tolerance while at the same time stating that individuals should not call themselves gay or lesbian.

> Some Baha'iss struggling with their sexual orientation have accepted into their core identity the concept "I am gay" or "I am lesbian" as a way of explaining the experience of uninvited sexual feelings towards others of the same sex, and even to imagine giving up this identity and the supportive community that goes along with it can be a fearful experience, calling for a major effort at sympathetic awareness by others of the difficulty involved. To change one's self-definition requires much effort, support and encouragement, and it will,

> most likely, be a complex and lengthy process marked by small, cumulative successes and a great deal of struggle.

Excerpt of essay, **Some reflections on the Baha'is Teachings as they relate to homosexuality** by Sam G. McClellan, M.D. Accessed 12 January 2010. This essay is on a page noted as being last updated in November 2004.

He ends with:

> In 1992, a group of these professionals formed a new organization, the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH). Four Baha'is mental health professionals attended the annual meeting of NARTH in Philadelphia in May 1994. Within the Baha'is community a committee was recently appointed to assist Assemblies and individuals dealing with issues of homosexuality.

The link is to a 2007 version of the page.

The website Religious Tolerance summarizes the Bahai position on homosexuality as being:

> -The Baha'i Faith teaches that homosexual behavior is unacceptable among its members. Voting rights of some of their lesbian, gay and bisexual members (LGB) who are out of the "closet" have been suspended; some memberships have been terminated.

My hope is that the Bahai community will show that such statements are no longer true. That, if there are sanctions that these are applied to heterosexuals or homosexuals, equally. That if a gay couple decide to join the Bahai community that their marriage will not be discriminated against and that youth will not be taught that homosexuality is a disease or an aberration, or that they must keep their orientation secret, but rather, the focus will be on celebrating the equality and diversity of humanity. And saying to any individual "we will tolerate you" is still a form of prejudice. In order not to discriminate we need to be welcoming.

Baha'i Faith Recognized In Vietnam

March 21st, 2007 was a historic day for the Baha'is of Vietnam. Not only did they celebrate the Holy Day of Naw Ruz but they also celebrated the recognition of their faith community by their government.

At a stately event held in Ho Chi Min City, the Government Religious Committee officially handed over the certificate of registration of religious activities to the Baha'i Community of Vietnam. Among the almost 300 participants were several high ranking federal, provincial and municipal government officials.

The ceremony also included prayers, a statement of congratulations from the House of Justice, a presentation of the significance of Naw Ruz and a video of the Shrine of the Bab in the Holy Land. This was an especially sweet experience for the veteran Vietnamese Baha'is who have endured 32 years under the shadow of the 'socialist revolution'. The event was covered by Vietnamese media with the news appearing in newspapers and radio broadcasts.

I'm sure that the Baha'i News Service will pick up on this *eventually*. But as of now, they have nothing over there.

UPDATE: BahaisOnline.net has posted 'proof' of the news I broke here so we can avoid the insults and vitriol of 'prove it' that accompanied the breaking of the Italian NSA scandal. I suppose since this involved government officials (as opposed to the Italy travesty which was 100% an internal mess) the media covered it. I just share things as they come to me. You decide what you do with them: believe them, ignore them, read them, etc.

Now go get some pho to celebrate this!

Baha’i Fast: Sunrise, Sunset Hours at High Altitude

Baha’is who are at high elevations might have a tough time fasting from sunrise to sunset. Of course, this is because when you are far, far away from the equator, the usual day night cycle is skewed.

To clarify this issue, the Universal House of Justice has explained that in such cases, Baha’is are free to depend on the clock to set the time of prayer and fasting.

For more see this letter from the NSA of Canada which contains the quote from the House of Justice:

> 9 March 2012 / 8 Loftiness 168
>
> Dear Baha’i Friends,

As you may be aware, in high latitudes where there is great variation in sunrise and sunset times during the course of the year, the times of prayer and fasting can be determined by the clock. The National Spiritual Assembly's policy is that the hours for sunrise and sunset in communities north of 60 degrees latitude will, year-round, be 0630h and 1800h respectively.

The National Assembly received an inquiry from an individual believer regarding whether it is mandatory for the friends living north of 60 degrees latitude to follow the clock during the Fast or whether they may choose to follow the sun. The National Assembly sought the guidance of the Universal House of Justice and we are happy to share the following reply:

"As you are aware, Baha'u'llah states that it is permissible in high latitudes to observe the laws of prayer and fasting in accordance with the clock rather than with the rising and setting of the sun. The House of Justice has left it to National Spiritual Assemblies to make the decision as to which areas of their countries and for which months of the year the beginning and ending of the Baha'i day are to be reckoned by the clock rather than by the sun and to fix the times to be observed for fasting, bearing in mind that the daily period of fasting lasts about twelve hours. By this ruling it is possible for the believers in the high latitudes to use the same standard for both prayer and fasting as well as for fixing the ending of each day in the Baha'i calendar, in determining the time for the starting of each Holy Day, and the holding of the Nineteen Day Feasts.

"The friends will, naturally, abide by the decision of the National Assembly. However, there can be no objection if a person chooses to fast for a longer period according to the hours of actual daylight. The decision of the National Assembly determines when the friends may apply the special provision for high latitudes; it does not compel them to do so."
(From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada dated 5 September 2011)

We send you the National Assembly's best wishes during these special days of fasting.

With loving Baha'i greetings,
NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF THE BAHA'IS OF CANADA

Baha'i Population Data for the United States

In a recent discussion we looked at the question of growth in Baha'i communities. While it may be relatively easy to calculate the size and growth rate of an individual Baha'i community from the regular annual reports which show new enrollments, resignations, and deaths, coming up with an accurate aggregate national number is not so easy.

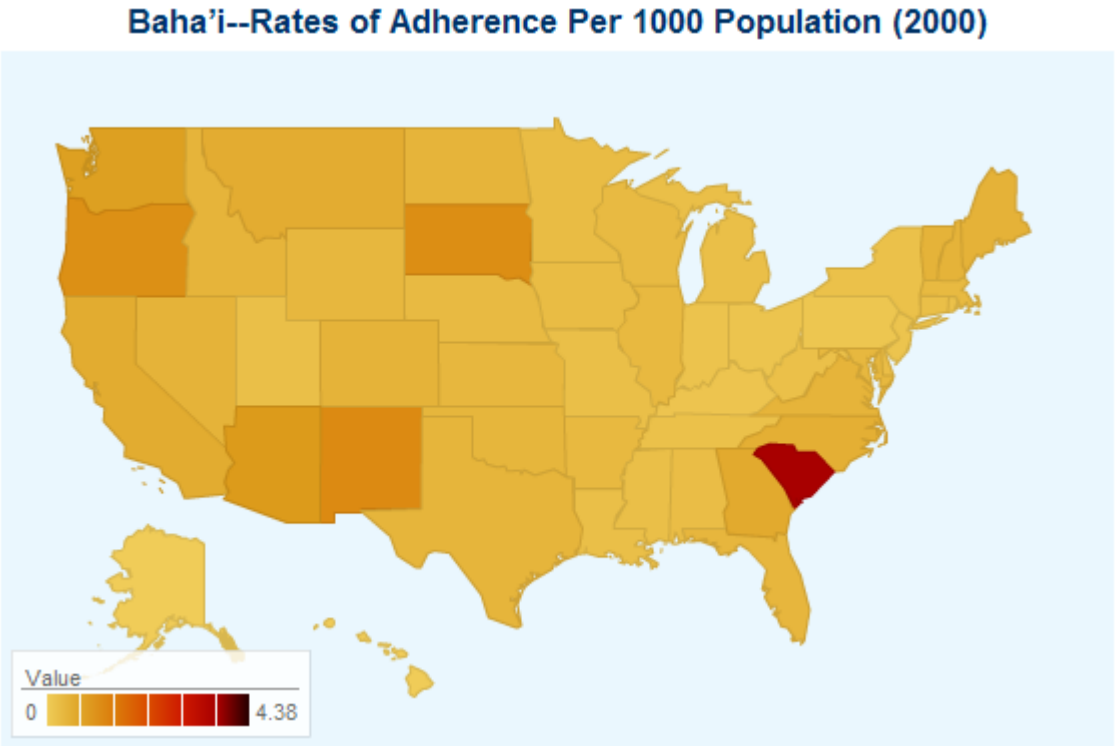
I know of no National Spiritual Assembly which shares this information in their annual reports. An alternative source is the government census data, as Steve pointed out in the comments section of that previous article.

In the US unfortunately we do not have access to census data because Public Law 94-521 prevents the US Census Bureau from collecting such information. So we must rely on third party or academic sources.

One such source is the Religious Congregations & Membership Study. The 2010 results of this study are shown below:

From it we can learn a few interesting facts: Most Baha'i communities are located in large cities or metropolitan areas. There is an almost complete penetration of US geographically with very few counties without a Baha'i presence. The West and East coast has high concentrations of Baha'is with central US states having less concentration. And for the most part there has been no major decadal change in Baha'i US population, with new declarants balancing losses.

South Carolina along with Arizona and New Mexico seem to be 'hotspots'. Another source confirms South Carolina as the state with the highest per capita Baha'i population:



From the Association of Religious Data Archives

The data is a bit dated being from 2000 but it shows 17,586 Baha'is in South Carolina representing 0.438% of the state's population. New Mexico is second with 2,665 and representing a relative 0.147% of that state's population.

If you know of a more accurate source, please let us know in the comments below.

Baha'i Ruhi Institute Course

Thanks to Steve for this gem from **Baha'i Studies**:

> In order to advance to an A cluster a certain number of people must complete a few of the courses. Since I don't really learn anything or enjoy Ruhi I was wondering if there is some way one can 'do' a course without going in a course with others. Would I be able to do it in my own time and write my answers in the book and then get it checked off by a tutor? That way I could do it quicker rather than prolonging the agony.

Oh the agony! I hear you David. I hear you. As Steve points out there is a way to do the Ruhi courses online. You can fill in the empty spaces, pull down the TRUE/FALSE menus and voila! (don't forget to hit submit) You're that one step closer to being a Sector A or B or whatever the heck they've cooked up now.

I'm sure this is exactly what Baha'u'llah had in mind when He wrote His mystical writings and asked us to immerse ourselves in the ocean of His Revelation… I'm sure He meant fill in the blank type questions which even a lobotomized rhesus monkey would find boring.

[eyeroll]

You know, as a commentator on the state of the Baha'i community, I work very hard at my satire. So it is damned infuriating when they do all the work for me. I just feel cheated. You know?

[kicks a pebble]

Sheesh…

The community finally reached Sector A++ level

Related:

- Ruhi
- Ruhi Redux

Baha'i Views on Church & State

As you know there are many Baha'is who mistakenly believe that future LSAs or local houses of justice will become the governing bodies replacing current municipal

institutions. And so on up the chain to the national level and ultimately to the UHJ which, I guess, they think will run the whole ball of wax.

Anyway, this neat comic strip, I thought encapsulates concisely the answer to these erroneously held beliefs :

A RUMOR ON THE INTERNETS
TATSUYA ISHIDA
WE HAVE YOU IN OUR PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE... WE SWEAR TO YOU IN OUR COURTS...
WE SING ABOUT YOU AT BASEBALL GAMES... WE THANK YOU AT AWARDS SHOWS...
YOU'RE IN OUR SCHOOLS, OUR COURTS! OUR BALLPARKS! OUR MONEY! YOU'RE EVERYWHERE!
I just want to be in your heart.

cartoon credit: Sinfest.net

> Dispute not with any one concerning the things of this world and its affairs, for God hath abandoned them to such as have set their affection upon them. Out of the whole world He hath chosen for Himself the hearts of men—hearts which the hosts of revelation and of utterance can subdue. Thus hath it been ordained by the Fingers of Bah??, upon the Tablet of God's irrevocable decree, by the behest of Him Who is the Supreme Ordainer, the All-Knowing.
> - Gleanings From the Writings of Bah??'u'll??h

And if you're really interested to getting a complete, thorough treatment of this, then click, don't run to Sen McGlinn's book or at his blog.

BahaiResearch.com – New & Improved

Usually when I'm looking up for a specific quote or topic within the Baha'i writings I head to the "official" Reference Library at the world center. But there's a new and improved website called BahaiResearch.com that has the same content, as well as writings from other religions and periphery content such as memoirs, pilgrims notes, etc.

Although the site is the work of Ian Vink and Runa Ali, it is hosted by USBNC.ORG (US Baha'i National Center web servers). And still the site is way too slow. Speed is extremely important for a search engine as it improves productivity and frequency of use.

bahairesearch

It also supports 14 languages in total: most romance languages, Arabic, Persian, Chinese, Japanese and more. As well, new documents are being continuously added. The best part is that it features boolean searches. This means you can use OR AND NOT to zero in on what you want.

You can even download the whole thing and work offline. And we are told that there are "widgets" coming that would enable you to embed it on your website to allow people a portal to access it.

You might remember a while back we talked about majnun, a Baha'i search engine which basically filtered the web according to what… we don't know. While majnun is simply a veiled exercise in censorship, Ian and Runa's project is about disseminating knowledge openly.

BahaiResearch.com reminds me of Ocean, another similar tool (but it is only downloadable and has no online feature).

So take BahaiResearch.com for a spin and let Ian know what you think. He's done a great job of not only designing a very easy to use application but one that has some real practical value.

Baha’is Arrested in Iran

My sources have confirmed the news that Wahid Azal (nee Nima Hazini) broke on his blog and talk.religion.bahai.Eleven Baha’is have been arrested recently in Iran.

Their only crime is being Baha’is in a country whose government has devoted itself to the persecution of Baha’is inside and outside its borders.

Six were arrested in Shiraz and five in Tehran. Those arrested were prominent members of their communities and active in Ruhi courses and other Baha’i activities (I’ve been informed that Ruhi, since it is new, so systematic and regimented, makes the Mullah’s very nervous). They were all simultaneously arrested at their respective homes in the early hours (6 am) of May 25th 2005. As far as I can tell they were made targets because of their leadership role in the community.

These Baha’is were not young adults or youth but were middle aged and mature members of their respective communities. Among them were both men and women (as well, atleast one of them had already lost a spouse to martyrdom in the past). The group from Shiraz has been moved to Tehran (probably Evin prison) where they are being interrogated. There has also been news of sporadic acts of vandalism and arson targeting the homes of Baha’is in Shiraz and surrounding areas.

The fact that they were all arrested at the same time, in different parts of the country (Tehran in the north and Shiraz in the south) and at their homes means that this was a very centralized and coordinated operation. The Office of Information was the official Iranian government branch which made the arrests. The Office of Information, in case you are not familiar, is an Orwellian titled branch of the IRI which spies on Iranians inside Iran. There is no doubt that Baha’is are under similar observation in other cities.

This event, coupled with the previous arrests and expulsions, points to an escalation in what was an otherwise quiet lull in the IRI treatment of Baha’is. I have strong doubts that these eleven Baha’is will be put to death (either immediately or at a later time). I think the IRI is sensing a new development rising from within the Baha’i community and it is making them nervous. This may just be their way of “putting Baha’is in their place”. And then again, maybe I hold this belief because I hope that they will not be harmed.

There has been no official response from the Baha'i community that I know of. The only reaction that I've been informed about has been a restriction of travel to Iran. All Baha'is wishing to travel to Iran must now write to their National Assemblies and request permission. Only those with urgent and special circumstances will be allowed to go. Failure to abide by this may result in removal of administrative rights.

I would like to ask for prayers on behalf of the eleven Baha'is and their families.

Baha'is Elect New National Spiritual Assembly Members

With Ridvan comes the National Baha'i Conventions as Baha'is everywhere around the world elect their new National Spiritual Members. Due to a systematic incumbency bias, the "new" NSA's are more than likely exactly the same as the "old" NSA. That certainly is the case in North America.

In the US, the delegates at the 14th Baha'i National Convention elected the following members (in descending order of votes):

Kenneth E. Bowers
Jacqueline Left Hand Bull
David F. Young

Muin Afnani
Juana C. Conrad
S. Valerie Dana
Fariba Aghdasi
Erica Toussaint-Brock
Robert C. Henderson

These were the same 9 individuals who were on the NSA previously. To illustrate just how much incumbency controls these elections, the first 5 members received the same order of magnitude of votes as last year (Kenneth E. Bowers the most, Jacqueline Left Hand Bull next, and so forth).

In Canada, the “new” National Spiritual Assembly is:

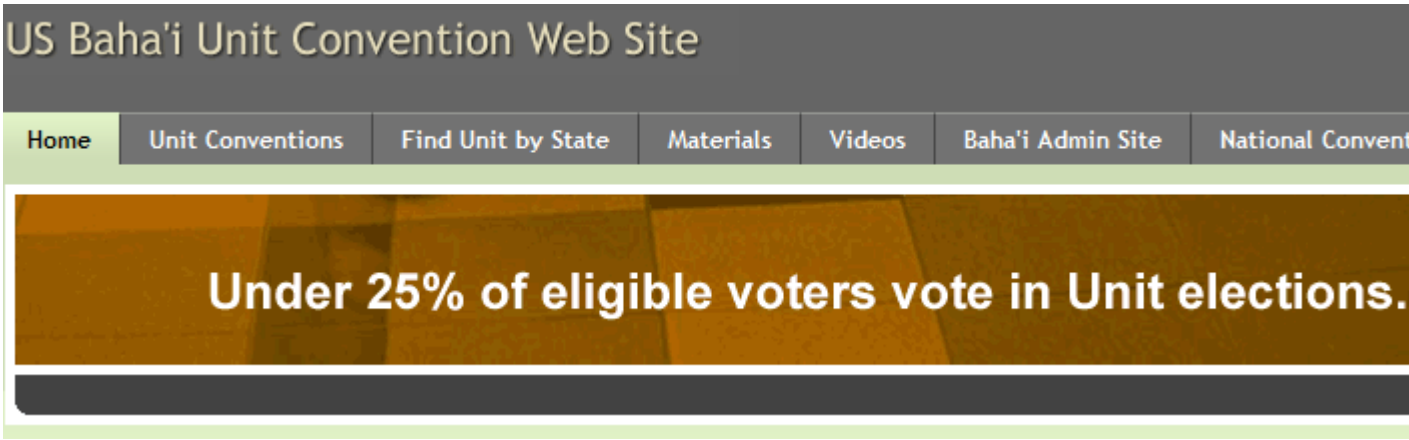
Mehran Anvari (Vice-Chairperson)
Deloria Bighorn (Chairperson)
Judy Filson

Lisa Flynn
Karen McKye (Secretary)
Gordon Naylor
Enayat Rawhani (Treasurer)
Susanne Tamas
Elizabeth Wright

These individuals have been elected to the NSA for many years. Judy Filson and Enayat Rohani have been serving for more than 17 years consecutively. For the NSA as a whole, the average consecutive membership is between 9-10 years. This means that on average each person has been an NSA member for about 10 years continuously.

Lisa Flynn, the youngest and newest member of the NSA replaces Simon Grandy who was in turn also the youngest and newest member at the time of his election in 2010. Flynn was previously on the appointed arm of the administration serving as an assistant ABM.

One interesting note is from the official US Baha'i Unit Convention site which tells us that less than 25% of eligible voters participate in these important elections:



This low participation rate certainly exacerbates the existing incumbency bias and further reinforces it. As the same nine people are elected again and again, individual Baha'is feel an increasing sense of apathy which keeps the participation rate low.

For a more in-depth discussion of the current challenges of Baha'i elections, see last year's article about the Canadian NSA and the US NSA elections.

Review of Baha'is In My Backyard

There is an interesting new film making waves in the Baha'i blogosphere recently. It is called "Baha'is in My Backyard" and it was made by a team of Israelis.

For the most part it is harmless exposure for the Faith, or as some may call it just another step in our "emergence to absurdity". Of course, that hasn't stopped the Baha'i Public Information Office from hyperventilating:

> "We would like to point out that this program does not provide an accurate, well-researched or sympathetic portrayal of the Faith. It would be preferable not to promote the program among Baha'is or members of the public. Individual Baha'is should not be disturbed by the program, but remain assured that even negative publicity can lead inquirers to investigate the Faith in order to discover its true nature. If individuals receive any questions about the program, they should answer these in a straightforward and truthful way."

The whole point of the film is curiousity. As a Baha'i living halfway around the world it may be hard for you to imagine this but Israelis, especially those living in Haifa are incredibly curious about the Baha'i Faith. But not in the way you imagine. What they want to know is what the heck is hidden under Mt. Carmel?

As neighbours they were there for all the clang, clatter and clamour of the incessant digging that went on for more than 3 years. Who would put such an extensive complex under a mountain? Other than Dr. Evil, of course. What possibly could they be doing in there? And why do Baha'is come from all over the world from all nationalities, creeds and colours, to disappear under Mt. Carmel?

Oh sure, the gardens are nice. They make great wedding picture backdrops and Israelis make full use of them as such. But that's on the surface. What they are dying to know is what exactly goes on under the surface of Mt. Carmel? And this being the Middle East, you must realize that there is never a short supply of conspiracy theories and convoluted conjecture.

Having been inside the "mountain complex", all I can do is tell the film makers that were they to actually venture inside, they would be bored to tears. Lets see, there are a few

cafeterias, countless offices, a couple of halls and functional areas like dark rooms, cold rooms for storage of archival material, etc.

Here is a clip from the movie where they try to get in to see the inside of the Baha'i World Center by becoming Baha'is. Alas, their genius scheme is thwarted by the fact that Israelis who want to become Baha'is are politely declined (if they are really keen and sincere, they must leave Israel to become a Baha'i):

BBC: Around the World in 80 Faiths – Baha'i Faith

Around the World in 80 Faiths is a BBC program that explores the nooks and crannies of the world for religions, spiritual traditions, exotic rituals and pilgrimage rites. Thanks to BahaisOnline.net for the tip.

The Baha'i Faith is #39 on the list. You can watch the short excerpt in the video below. The program is hosted by Peter Owen Jones, an Anglican vicar from the UK.

But as you might expect, Peter Owen Jones isn't your typical vicar. He wears his hair dishevelled, sports cowboy boots, smokes, kicks back stiff drinks and has no qualms about getting mixed up with some exotic and downright strange rituals. The man is so open-minded, so curious and so ready to put himself in vulnerable situations that you can't help but admire him.

Now, running around the world experiencing 80 different religions is a tall order and I don't blame Jones for not being able to delve into the intricate details and histories of every one of them. But from watching the clip about the Baha'i Faith, it is obvious that he is making some very basic mistakes and misrepresenting what the Baha'i Faith is, exactly.

He says in the video:

> Personally, I think one of the refreshing things about the Baha'i [sic] is that to become a Baha'i, you don't even have to give up your existing religion.

This is, obviously, incorrect.

In the past, when the Faith was still very young, Baha'is were allowed to continue their affiliation with their previous religious institutions but gradually, we have come to recognize that as an independent religion, identifying as a Baha'i means that we leave behind previous affiliations. Shoghi Effendi was the Baha'i central figure that made this delineation. Currently there are only a few countries that are allowed exceptions to this, but for the rest of the world being a Baha'i means just that.

The Baha'i Faith comes across as one of the better or 'best' religions that are featured in the program. But if that is because it is characterized as a vague, all-inclusive, *anything goes* religion, it is misplaced. However, I do share Jones' hope that the future is one where we are united in diversity.

I'm not sure where he got his information about the Baha'i Faith but Jones doesn't seem to have a good grasp of things even beyond such elemental levels. For example, at the beginning he says that "the followers of the Baha'i Faith have built a garden at the shrine of their prophet, known as the Bab…" Without meaning to quibble over details, this is also incorrect. The prophet of the Baha'i Faith is Baha'u'llah. The prophet of the Babi Faith is the Bab. Perhaps Jones knows this and simply misspoke.

In a little bit, you can buy the book: Around the World in 80 Faiths. Here is the BBC website for the program.

It is wonderful to see such a program – even if it has a few errors – because it shows that we are slowly moving towards a recognition that we are all one family. Even if we may seem to have different ways of approaching spirituality, our intentions flow from the same divine inspiration. This reminds me of another project which I mentioned a while back: A Year of Faith where a group of youth decided to practice a different religion for a month (for a year). That project delved into the Faith in much more depth and resulted in some interesting perspectives:

An Introduction to the Baha'i Faith
The Kitab-i-Iqan
Theological Problems of the Baha'i Faith
The Baha'i Faith and Homosexuality

As a Baha'i, I greatly appreciate these efforts because it allows us to gain insight into what an 'average person' might go through when investigating the Faith.

BBC Radio Hosts Frank Discussion on the Baha'i Faith

Recently BBC Radio 4's "Beyond Belief" program hosted by award winning host and producer, Ernie Rea held a surprisingly frank discussion on the Baha'i Faith.

Ernie Rea

This type of program is rather rare but hopefully not for much longer. Usually media mentions of the Baha'i Faith tend to be public relations type story plants which announce an important milestone or event like the recent completion of the multi-year renovation of the Shrine of the Bab.

Most general media audiences are not familiar with the Baha'i Faith making it a low priority for most journalists. Even more esoteric are the relatively new challenges and frictions within the worldwide Baha'i community.

This program features Denis MacEoin, a Babi, Baha'i and Muslim scholar who left the Faith in the 1980's as a result of the infamous clashes that occurred between academics and various persons within the Baha'i institutions at the time. Although he was half a world away, MacEoin participated in the LA Baha'i Study Class of the mid to late 1970's. Ernie Rae's panel also includes Moojan Momen and Lil Osborn, both Baha'is. As well as Fidelma Meehan, a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the

United Kingdom who recounts how she learned of the Faith in university. The complete audio of the program and transcript is below. I welcome your thoughts and comments.

It make more sense to listen or read the program before reading my reactions. Several important points jumped at me as I listened. First, I'm surprised that someone as knowledgeable as MacEoin would claim that the Bab wasn't really concerned about the next Manifestation of God. I'm also surprised that MacEoin says that the Bab was the first to lay claim to being the "Mahdi" or Qaim, the 12th Imam or the Hidden Imam. There were in fact 8 previous claimants going back as far as the 8th century and 6 other claimants after the Bab – Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the Ahmadiyyiha movement being the most famous and successful among this group. Even today there are people making the claiming.

It is also surprising that neither Momen nor MacEoin take this opportunity to raise the issue of Momen's irredeemable paper "Marginality and Apostasy in the Baha'i Community" which resulted in an unprecedented editorial response from the publication declaring:

> This incident clearly points to the absence of a code of research ethics in our ? eld. The fact that so many individuals felt a need to protest against what they perceive as misrepresentation illustrates the need to take potential dangers to the in-tegrity of persons more actively in to account in the review process and editorial decisions. Possibly, we need to change our procedure in cases where people are targeted in ways that go beyond the usual forms of scholarly discussion (such as in reviews). The editors of *Religion* have begun discussing the possibility of dedicating a special issue on research ethics in the study of religion(s).

Religion subsequently published several responses, including one from Denis MacEoin, (as well as Momen's own rebuttal): Challenging apostasy: Responses to Moojan Momen's 'Marginality and Apostasy in the Baha'i Community'

It is unfortunate that the discussion about the "paradox" of the exclusion of women from the House of Justice does not touch on the points raised in such papers as The Service of Women on the Institutions of the Baha'i Faith. Of course I don't expect Momen, Osborn or Meehan to bring it up but MacEoin doesn't either.

Momen's defense of the Baha'i institutions is equally puzzling when he claims: "All of the institutions of the Faith are elected…". Only one pillar out of two is elected, the other is appointed. Furthermore, in recent years we have seen a phenomena where the appointed bodies have come to have more prominence and clout. And the members of the Universal House of Justice sourced from the very same group of individuals the House of Justice itself appoints! This circular administrative order at the top of the Baha'i leadership is most definitely not "democratic". Point to MacEoin – if anyone is keeping score.

The claim that the Baha'i Faith envisions the world governed by one world government does not mean that that government would be either Baha'i in nature or a theocracy. For more, see Baha'i Views on Church and State. The treatment of Baha'i publication review is equally superficial with no acknowledgement that the Faith is now engaged with a dynamic global audience that is able to ascertain fact from fiction and to differentiate between a person's opinion or actions and the official policies of their respective religious authority. Do you think any of the 99% of the Catholics who use contraception need to be coddled about how one individual Bahai's opinion about a matter may not necessarily match with that of the Universal House of Justice?

Another golden opportunity would have been the paper written by another member of the NSA of the UK, Barney Leith arguing that it is now time to do away with publication review (written in 1995!): Baha'i Review: Should the 'red flag' law be repealed?

Of course many other fascinating points of discussion were also ignored. For example, the view of the Baha'i Faith on homosexuality.

Audio:

Transcript:

Ernie: Hello, members of the Baha'i Faith hold to three cardinal beliefs: the unity of God, the unity of religion and the unity of humankind. Human beings are here to learn to love God and to be of service to others; universal principles. But Baha'is have suffered dreadful persecutions for their beliefs in places like Iran, Egypt and Afghanistan. So who are the Baha'is? what do they believe? and why do they attract such opposition in some Islamic countries? and what challenges does modernity pose to their own principles of equality and tolerance?

Joining me to discuss the Baha'i Faith are Lil Osborn, herself a Baha'i and whose book on the Baha'is in Britain will soon be published. Moojan Momen a Baha'i researcher and writer and Denis MacEoin a senior editor of the Middle East Quarterly who used to be a Baha'i but has left the Faith.

Lil, you've taught religious studies in schools, when you introduce your students to the Baha'i Faith do you present it as one of the major world religions like Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, or do you compare it with what we might call new religious movements like Jehova's Witnesses or Mormon's?

Lil: I think I tend to put it somewhere in the middle really. It's a world religion in so far as it is spread worldwide; whether its major or not at this stage in time is debatable. But it certainly doesn't conform to the stereotype of new religious movement. It's too early to conform to Eileen Barker's definition of a new religious movement.

Moojan: Eileen Barker being a sociologist who has done a lot of work in this.

Ernie: Denis, where do you stand on that? new religious movement or world religion?

Denis MacEoin

Denis: New religious movement on the whole – not because it starts in the middle of the 19th century its because it really starts as a world movement in the 20th century so there' actually chronologically in line with others. It also has none of the definitions of a world religion in the sense that it has very low numbers. Its got fewer members worldwide than the Mormons for example. There is no one country that has Baha'i as its main religion. There is no Baha'i culture. No Baha'i music. No Baha'i literature. It just simply doesn't have all the features that we associate with a world religion, however else you define that. Even in say comparison with Judaism. Small in numbers 12-14 million perhaps worldwide

but vastly rich in history, culture and so on and therefore you can't really compare Baha'i to something like that.

Ernie: I suppose Moojan it can be said that it is very widespread. Maybe small in numbers but they spread to virtually all corners of the earth.

Moojan: Yes, there are Baha'i communities in virtually every country of the world.
And there has been for several decades now. I think this question of new religious movement or world religion really depends on how you define those two terms. I would agree with Lil that its a new religious movement that's moving towards being a world religion. It hasn't got to that stage yet. And I agree with Denis, it hasn't gotten cultural depth and history behind it because it is only a hundred and sixty years old. But on the other hand it certainly isn't a sect of another religion. For example, its not a sect of Islam, its not a sect of any other religion. It is gradually evolving for itself the beginnings of a culture in terms of art and music and so forth.

Ernie: You say it is not a sect of another religion but I want to look at history. It emerged out of Islam, it emerged out of Shi'ite Islam in Iran. And it began with a person called the Bab who became convinced that he was the Mahdi – a great religious leader – the twelfth or missing Imam. Just explain a little about the Bab, put it into context for me Moojan.

Moojan: In both Sunni and Shi'ite Islam there is an expectation of the Mahdi. But in Shi'ite Islam, which is the form of Islam that predominates in Iran, this figure of the Mahdi relates to one of the early religious leaders who is said to have gone into occultation and they are expecting his return. The Bab initially put forward a claim of being the representative of this Imam. But then came out and said no he is actually the twelfth Imam, this figure that was being expected, this Imam Mahdi. On the basis of this claim he created quite a stir in Iran. Quite a large number of people from all walks of life, from the royal court circles down to the humble villagers became followers of this figure in a very short space of time.

Ernie: Lil, he appears to an outsider to be a sort of John the Baptist figure. Somebody who prepared the way for the great prophet Baha'u'llah.

Lil: In many ways he does perform that function within this tradition. But he is himself a manifestation of God. So it is slightly a different status from the way that Christians, for example, perceive John the Baptist.

Ernie: But he did say that one would come who…

Lil: Indeed.

Ernie: … who God will make manifest, I think was the phrase. Denis, he was executed. Why?

Denis: Because of his claims. On the one hand his claims and because his followers in many areas were armed and getting into conflict with state forces. Therefore Babis were seen as disruptive and dangerous elements to society. That itself has a lot to do with the execution. Beyond that his teachings were eccentric in the extreme. Modern Baha'is would often be quite shocked to learn how very very bizarre some of them were.

Ernie: Give me one illustration.

Denis: He has regulations about how you should eat an egg. Or that a man and a woman can only exchange only, I think its, 19 words between them. He had laws for fighting holy war and for conquering various countries in the neighborhood. He was an unusual character and I don't think really had the least idea of prophesying the coming of somebody after him. His ideas were frankly a lot more complex than that.

Ernie: Moojan.

Moojan: I would first of all disagree with the idea that he didn't prophesy this figure, "He Whom God Shall Make Manifest". His major book which is called the Bayan, in that book practically every chapter has mentions of this figure, "He Whom God Shall Make Manifest". He was certainly putting forward to his followers the fact that this person would come. That's evidenced by the fact that after him quite a few of his followers actually claimed to be this figure before Baha'u'llah made the major claim and attracted most of the Babis to his claim.

Ernie: I want to turn now to this great figure, Baha'u'llah, who is the founder of the Baha'i Faith, tell me a little about him Lil.

Lil: He was a Persian, he lived in the 19th century. He was a follower of the Bab but never actually met him. He declared himself as the one that the Bab had prophesized to come, of course after that huge persecution rained down upon him and he and his family were forced to leave Persia. They traveled across, finally settling in what is modern day Israel.

During his lifetime he revealed huge amounts of scripture, which Baha'is believe to be directly from God, if you like, directly revealed through a manifestation. And these were written down at the time, and the came in both Persian and Arabic, so there is no question of authenticity being at stake over these writings.

Ernie: Denis, I suppose it is hardly surprising there was persecution because here was somebody, a Persian, an Iranian who was actually saying "I'm a prophet after Mohammad" and Islam believes that Mohammad is the last of the prophets.

Denis: Well, yes, he is the first person to do this, to make that claim of being a prophet after Mohammad. That is something that is utterly unacceptable to Muslims. The whole very thought of that; Mohammad is the last prophet, the Koran the final revelation. Therefore for someone to stand up and say "Well, I'm a prophet and here is another revelation" was and is very very shocking and as we know, basically, the punishment for apostasy in Islam is death. And that has therefore sparks off the kind of persecution, the violent persecution, that we have seen somewhat particularly in recent years but certainly beginning at the time of Baha'u'llah as well.

Ernie: I want to turn to the teachings, Moojan. I've mentioned one or two of them: the unity of God, the unity of religions, the unity of humankind. Just fill that out a little for me.

Moojan: Well, I think Baha'u'llah's vision was that we've now moved to a new era in the progress or development of humanity which is a global era; that we must start thinking of the world as a whole and we must put aside narrower more parochial concerns and start thinking in terms of what is in the interest of the world. So for example, He says all humanity are the citizens of one country.

He, as it were, brought these teachings which were mainly focused on this idea of unity. Uniting humanity, bringing together, really removing all the causes of separation whether those are religious causes, racism, all of these sorts of different aspects that divide humanity and keep humanity apart, He was trying to remove.

Ernie: And one consequence of that unity to the world is that one day Baha'ullah promised, there would be a world government, Denis.

Denis: Yup, absolutely. There are people who disagree with that but I think that is absolutely true. The reason for this is, again it goes back to Islam. Islam is not just a

religion, its religion plus politics; Its an ideology in that sense. Therefore for Baha'is, just to be a religion, again, is not appropriate. They need to bring into being a whole international system so that ultimately the Baha'i Faith is the religion of the entire world and there are no other political systems in power at all. Its an undemocratic system so we have to take it seriously as a threat to open, free, democratic governing that we have, at least, in the West at present.

Ernie: Moojan.

Moojan: Well, I again, I don't recognize this at all. All of the institutions of the Faith are elected therefore democracy is at the heart of the Baha'i Faith. And there is no question of Baha'is imposing their system on others.

Ernie: Well, let me remind you that you are listening to "Beyond Belief" and today we are discussing the Baha'i Faith which emerged out of Iran in the 19th century and now claims to be the second most widespread religion in the world. And with me are Lil OSborn, Moojan Momen – both members of the Baha'i Faith – and Denis MacEoin.

Fidelma Meehan

The Baha'i Faith is a missionary faith and it draws converts from a variety of religious backgrounds. **Fidelma Meehan** was brought up as a Catholic in Northern Ireland before she was drawn to the Baha'is.

Fidelma: Well, I first heard of the Baha'i Faith when I was at university in Coleraine, the University of Ulster. I was on a course with a person called Omid Djalili who is now very well known as a comedian here in Britain and an actor in Hollywood as well.

Omid introduced me to the idea of the Baha'i Faith, the idea of the oneness of religions and the inclusivity of all the religions. He said it was like seeing religion as chapters of one

book and I got very excited about that. So my journey on faith really was a journey of laughter of discovery and really embracing spiritual realities that I guess probably always believed in.

Ernie: But at the time you met Omid you were a Catholic.

Fidelma: At the time when I met Omid and I was still a practicing Catholic I was a questioning Catholic and I was really wanting to find answers to my questions that weren't always forthcoming within my own faith. And then to have actually Omid recast the whole understanding of what religion is for me was an eye opening moment.

I had never seen religion like this before because initially it was different religions all often fighting or arguing among each other. Now this eye opening moment brought an understanding that all religions could be progressive stages of one faith. And that they all had connections, they were all from one source. That their founders were divine educators such as Moses, Christ, Krishna, Mohammad. So that really made a lot of sense for me.

Ernie: Now you're a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of Baha'is in the United Kingdom. What's your role in that body?

Fidelma: Well, there are nine members on that body and we consult about all the issues that are pertaining to the spiritual rejuvenation of the United Kingdom. To how we really get out those beautiful spiritual teachings of Baha'u'llah out to the people of the UK and that they are there to be applied and to put into action.

Ernie: Now you are clearly a person of some standing in the Baha'i movement in the UK and yet you can never be a member of the Universal House of Justice which is the overall body that exercises leadership in the Baha'i movement in the world and you can't be because you're a woman. How do you feel about that?

Fidelma: Well absolutely fine about it actually. Baha'u'llah has clearly said that there won't be women admitted to be elected on the Universal House of Justice. But this doesn't in any way indicate that men and women are not equal. The wisdom we are told from the Baha'i Writings, the wisdom of this, will be manifest as clearly as the sun at high noon.

Ernie: But not yet.

Fidelma: But not yet. And I think it wouldn't be correct to deduce from this any implication of inequality between the sexes because the Baha'i principle of the equality of men and women in clearly stated in the teachings.

Ernie: It strikes me though that you've left one patriarchal organization, the Catholic Church, for another one, the Baha'i movement.

Fidelma: Well this clearly isn't the case. I think today there are systems and laws that when we align ourselves to them will bring out the potential of every human being. Most of those laws we can make great sense of today, in this age, others become clear over time.

I think that we are all equal in that we all an opportunity to grow spiritually and contribute to an ever advancing civilization and bring about the kind of community, the kind of world, Baha'u'llah had envisaged in His writings over a hundred years ago.

Ernie: That was Fidelma Meehan, and Denis it strikes me that Fidelma's clearly an intelligent, powerful woman and yet she got no problem with her exclusion from the Universal House of Justice.

Denis: Well, I can see that. It's quite common for Baha'is to think that way. It does rather worry me because there's failure perhaps to say what the House of Justice stands for. The House of Justice isn't just a sort of governing administrative body; it is in fact the body endowed with the right to make laws. Now most of the Baha'i laws that have been written already by Baha'u'llah can never be changed which is one of the reasons I talk about it being undemocratic if you can't change the law.

But the only person or body that has the right to add new ones is the Universal House of Justice. And if you stop and think about what that means. The implication that a woman is not fit to be in the body that makes the laws is yet another indication of how lacking it is in genuine democratic spirit.

Ernie: Lil.

Lil: I always find it quite strange that people talk about patriarchy and so on and then get worried about leaderships which strikes me as a terribly patriarchal way of looking at things. The Universal House of Justice does exclude women, I don't know why. I think it is

a kind of anomaly, in some level if you look at the roles of men and women as being one about being the same rather than ones about being equal.

Because the Baha'i Faith has got a tremendous track record on working in projects with women in raising the attainment of women in all sorts of projects around the world.

Ernie: But the principal point that Denis is making is that when it comes to being able to make rules that are going to govern the behavior of people, Baha'i people today, women have no part in that body.

Lil: They don't have part in that body but they have a huge part in the organizations that elect that body and in the teachings committees… women

Ernie: So Baha'is are all equal but some Baha'is are more equal than others?

Lil: No, I don't think that's a fair analysis. People don't go to church on the off chance they might become the Archbishop of Canterbury. Women don't become Baha'is on the off chance of… anybody become Baha'i on the off chance they might become a member of the House of Justice.

Ernie: Moojan.

Moojan: I think we should not overlook the vast contribution that the Baha'i community has made towards the equality of men and women. For example, one of the fundamental Baha'i teachings that is in the scripture of the Faith is if you are in a situation where you have children and you can't afford to educate all of your children you should educate the girl child before educate the boy child. So in that area women actually have superiority over men in that particular field and that's because…

Ernie: I don't dispute that for one moment and I'm sure Baha'is have done enormous things to bring about a greater role for women. But in an organization that actually prides itself on its egalitarian principles it seems very strange that a half of the human race should be excluded from its governing body.

Moojan Momen

Moojan: I agree, it's a paradox. But the paradox doesn't mean that Baha'is are not treating men and women equally in the community.

Ernie: Denis.

Denis: I don't deny that. I think the Baha'is have done a lot of good for egalitarianism of that particular kind. I think the problem for me is just a little bit wider. And that is, to see how the system works in its entirety you've got to understand Baha'is are not allowed to form any kind of parties. They, even at whatever level of the administration…

Ernie: Politial parties, you mean Denis?

Denis: Political or religio-political parties. They are not allowed to have an opposition to any of the institutors. In other words, basically, one common agreement on everything particularly with God and administration. That is why I call it authoritarian. Just having elections doesn't actually make any movement democratic. But there is no opportunity whatsoever to disagree with decisions, that are made, particularly by the Universal House of Justice.

Ernie: Moojan.

Moojan: The fact is that we don't have political parties precisely because we are, as it were, focused on the idea of unity therefore what we do is come together and consult about matters and come, as a community at a local level, to a decision at a local level and then we all support what that decision is – whether we agree to it when it first was being discussed or not, the important point is create unity and to have unity in action. So that you then… If it is the wrong decision it becomes clear all that much more quickly if people are not constantly sniping away at it.

Ernie: Denis, as I understand it, if a Baha'i is writing about their faith in a publication, book or magazine, they must first submit that to their Local Spiritual Assembly for their OK.

Denis: Well, I think it is the National Spiritual Assembly. Most National Assemblies have committees. I used to be in one of these committees myself. A committee which basically approves or disapproves or demands changes in texts.

That principle has continued to the present day and it does mean that people writing quite honest and often academically about the religion, but saying something that is slightly controversial may find that they are forbidden to publish or that they have to remove material. And if people do publish something and Baha'is don't like it, then they will write refutations and it can sometimes get quite unpleasant.

Ernie: Lil, did you have to submit your book?

Lil: Books are submitted for review by a reviewing office. Its time consuming and I'm not saying that it makes publication easy but you can't be forced to change things. They can suggest and they can say that they disagree but they'd have to give reasons if they disagree on something factual.

Ernie: Can you remain a Baha'i if you write something they don't like?

Lil: Yeah. I have.

Ernie: Moojan.

Moojan: Let's go back to what the idea of review is. The Baha'i Faith is a young religion. Most of your listeners will not have heard anything about it at all. So if some Baha'i were to write an article that Baha'is believe in, uh, I don't know, suicide… or…

Lil: Child sacrifice.

Moojan: …child sacrifice, or something outrageous – the fact is, because a Baha'i has said that, people will assume that's the truth. If some were to say the same thing about Christianity, everyone knows that's nonsense and dismiss they'd it. If someone says that about the Baha'i Faith people would assume its the truth. The whole point of this review process – which is a temporary thing, it's not a permanent feature of the Baha'i Faith – is

that while the Baha'i Faith is obscure and people don't know what it actually stands for, people who are writing about the Baha'i Faith who are Baha'is are asked to submit this to the reviewing committee. The point of it is not to censor or anything. It's just to make sure that what is being written about the Baha'i Faith is, in broad terms, compatible with the broad Baha'i teachings. And that's the rationale for it.

Ernie: Denis.

Denis: I can see the rationale for it but I think Moojan, is perhaps, gliding over problems that have certainly surfaced. I think a lot of American Baha'is who have come under heavy pressure about books they have written. I'm not saying it can lead to expulsion but there are things like having voting rights removed. Not only that, publishing a book without authorization, being defiant of the Baha'i institutions is going to get you into a lot of trouble. So I think its not quite as simple or as benign as Moojan makes it seem to be.

Moojan: First of all, if people flout Baha'i procedures and laws, they don't get expelled straight away. They get counseled, it gets pointed out to them what the problem is that they've produced and so forth. It is only repeated, flagrant, willful breaches of Baha'i procedures and laws that brings about any sanctions.

Ernie: As we bring this program to close I'd like to ask each of you a question: Lil, what must the Baha'i Faith do in the next few years to progress its mission? most important thing it has to do?

Lil: I think it has to break out of its bubble where it tends to be very middle class. Quite often it projects itself… bringing up the stuff about the equality of men and women is an interesting one. The trouble is that they've never really distinguished what they mean by "equality of men and women" from say, secular feminism. Those lines need to be drawn because one of the problems is that the Baha'i Faith can come across as a liberal-social-kind-of agenda. When in fact its actually very much more.

The problem is at the moment it attracts people who are looking for something different from what its actually offering. Those people may well find themselves disappointed. I would like to see the Faith actually root itself more in the spiritual and mystical approaches rather than its social and quasi-political ideas because most of those have been won now anyway.

Ernie: Denis.

Denis: I don't think there is a great deal that the Baha'is can do. They will probably go on growing at the extremely slow rate – because it is one of the slowest growing religions in the world. They are trapped by things like the unchangeable laws, by the their administrative order which is not deemed to be man made but divine and can not be changed. As time goes by, the Baha'i Faith is gradually getting more and more out of date and in conflict with progressive ideas in the world at large, at least certainly with the West.

Ernie: Moojan.

Moojan: Yes, I think what the Baha'i community is doing, as well as developing the spiritual side of the Baha'i Faith and the Baha'i community, it is coming out of its bubble, if you like, in terms of reaching out into the community, becoming more active in the community so as to engage the whole community in the sort of goals towards unity to which Baha'is are striving.

Ernie: Well that's all for this edition of "Beyond Belief". My thanks to Lil Osborne, Moojan Momen and Denis MacEoin. I'll be back next Monday with another edition of "Beyond Belief".

Because Bah??'u'll??h Said So!!

Here's a very interesting article from the 1995 *Baha'i Studies Review*. This means that it actually passed Baha'i pre-publication review – so if you're concerned, rest assured that the institutions ok'ed this. As far as I know, the author isn't a naughty Baha'i "dissident".

If it was up to me, this sort of material would be in Ruhi, rather than the mind-numbing regurgitation of platitudes we currently have. It may be a bit long but I think when you finish the first paragraph you'll be hooked (bold is my own emphasis):

"Because Bah??'u'll??h said so": dealing with a non-starter in moral reasoning
Arash Abizadeh
Published in the Baha'i Studies Review, vol. 5.1 (1995)

My aim here is to deal with one faulty way of justifying a normative Baha'is position, not because it carries any serious philosophical weight, but because of its apparent popularity amongst those who wish to eliminate, right at the outset, any need for further moral reflection and consultation. This is the **"because Bah??'u'll??h said so" school of thought**. Such-and-such is wrong, it is asserted tout court, because Bah??'u'll??h said it is wrong, and no other reason need be provided. **This "answer", though philosophically bankrupt, is rhetorically powerful, because its proponents can immediately end any dissent by making agreement with them seem like a matter of faithfulness to the Covenant**. (1) **Because the rhetorical power of pulling the "Covenant card" here heralds an end to the independent investigation of truth and consultation, it is a particularly insidious non-answer that we would do well to consider carefully.**

Let us first distinguish two senses of saying that x is wrong because Bah??'u'll??h says it is wrong (where x is some activity, action, state of affairs, etc). First, one might simply be asserting that Bah??'u'll??h's saying that x is wrong gives us a (peremptory) reason for believing that it is so. Much of the rhetorical power of the because-Bah??'u'll??h-said-so school rests on this intuition. But this is besides the point when one is engaged in moral justification. When we demand the basis of the Baha'is normative position on x, we are asking for (a) the philosophical justification of the position that x is wrong, and not for (b) the reason for the belief that it is so, or for the moral agent's reason for action according to that position.(2)

One may, for example, have very good reasons for believing that something is true, but without knowing the reasons why it is that it is true.

Second, one might be asserting that Bah??'u'll??h (or God) saying that morality is such and such makes it so. That is, one might adopt the position of divine voluntarism, which holds that the moral good is the moral good simply because it is willed as the moral good by the divine Will. Here then, one could reject the "because Bah??'u'll??h said so" school by rejecting voluntarism. One would accuse the school of getting it backwards: x is not wrong because Bah??'u'll??h said it is wrong, rather, Bah??'u'll??h said it is wrong because it is wrong.(3) But I wish to remain agnostic on this issue, and leave open the possibility, without committing myself to it, that Baha'is ethics presupposes divine voluntarism. For example, one might cite, in favour of a voluntarist position, the passage in The Kit??b-i-Aqdas in which Bah??'u'll??h urges religious leaders not to judge the word of

God by their own prevalent standards since God's word itself is the standard of right and wrong, truth and error: "the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men" (¶99). This passage need not at all be taken to be one in support of the voluntarist position, but my argument here does not depend on settling that issue one way or the other.

If this passage is interpreted as supporting voluntarism, it could also be cited in favour of the because-Bah??'u'll??h-said-so school, but only if one interprets its application in the first of two ways. The first way is the doctrine of immediate application, the second a doctrine of mediate application. On the first doctrine, one would apply voluntarist justification immediately at the level of each and every particular injunction, ordinance, exhortation, law, and claim of Baha'is ethics. So the moral reason that, say, taking mind-altering substances is wrong, would be that Bah??'u'll??h has forbidden it, period. We would need no further reflection on the matter, and the reasons given in the Baha'is writings for the law, such as its effect on the soul and human moral agency, would be superfluous. Much of the rhetorical force of the doctrine of immediate application rests on the ambiguity, identified earlier, between two very different propositions. One was (a) the proposition that the divine say-so provides the justificatory basis for a given moral claim or principle; another was (b) the proposition that the divine say-so provides a (peremptory) reason for belief in, or a (peremptory) reason for action according to, that principle. The because-Bah??'u'll??h-said-so school, and its doctrine of immediate application, would have us believe that the second proposition (b) justifies the first (a), but the move from (b) to (a) is clearly logically fallacious.

In the case of the doctrine of mediate application, the (fiat of the) divine Will serves as a voluntarist justification for the totality of the ethical theory as a whole, but not as a justification for a particular moral or ethical claim. Instead, the justification for a particular moral claim is made in terms of the other moral principles and concepts which form a part of the total theoretical framework. On this doctrine, for example, Baha'is ethical theory's justification for the particular moral claim that some action (e.g., taking mind-altering substances) is wrong, must be given in terms of the other moral principles and concepts which form the totality of Baha'is ethics (e.g., it retards the progress of the soul, or it forfeits "moral responsibility"), even if the ultimate basis for that totality be the divine say-so. In other words, the divine say-so plays a role in meta-ethical, but not ethical, justification. The mediate doctrine presupposes, of course, that Baha'is ethics forms a rationally coherent theoretical framework.

The point here is not that divine voluntarism is correct; rather that even if we were to concede it, we would still need to reject the immediate application doctrine, and with it the because-Bah??'u'll??h-said-so school, because a Baha'is voluntarist account must adopt a mediate application doctrine. That this is so can be readily seen by the fact that both Bah??'u'll??h and 'Abdu'l-Bah?? write as if their teachings form part of a coherent whole, and hence both freely justify a given principle (e.g. the forbidding of alcohol) in terms of other Baha'is ethical principles and concepts (e.g. moral responsibility, or the progress of the soul). This also appears to be part of the reason why so many Baha'iss have difficulty coming to terms with the fact of male-exclusivity in the membership of the Universal House of Justice: because it appears not to be justifiable in terms of, indeed it appears to contradict, other moral principles which form a part of the totality of Baha'is moral and political philosophy. Notice again that citing Bah??'u'll??h's say-so regarding male-exclusivity only provides Baha'iss with (b) a (peremptory) reason for believing that it is a proper moral principle(4) (presumably fitting coherently into the whole theoretical framework), and a (peremptory) reason for action according to that principle, without illuminating (a) the justificatory basis for that principle–after all, 'Abdu'l-Bah?? had said that that justificatory reason would become apparent in the future, even though Baha'iss already had Bah??'u'll??h's say-so when 'Abdu'l-Bah?? was writing. The latter does not provide the former.

So to determine the basis for the Baha'is position on some question in ethics, one must consider Baha'is ethical theory as a whole, and justify the position in those terms, and not in terms of the divine say-so. What is more, given the Baha'is principle of the harmony of science and religion, and that religion must be scientific in its method, the Baha'is position must be interpreted in light of some background knowledge gleaned from the natural and social sciences. If an interpretation of the Baha'is position on racism were advanced which entailed or presupposed that the earth was flat, then that would count against the interpretation in question–insofar as the scientific evidence suggests that the earth is not flat.(5)

End Notes

1. This is a favourite rhetorical tool used when one is too fearful to hold one's own beliefs up to the light of consultative scrutiny, and wishes instead to silence others into submission.

2. For the reader not familiar with the terminology, I offer the following explication of a "reason for belief", a "reason for action", and a "peremptory" or "preemptive" reason, as these concepts are used in moral and political philosophy. For example, consider a possible claim in political philosophy that (1) a legitimate authority's commands give you a "peremptory reason for action", but (2) not a "peremptory reason for belief". This dual claim means the following. Let us say that there are a set of (say, moral) reasons why you ought to do x, and a set of other (moral) reasons why you ought not to do x, but do y instead (where x and y are distinct actions). And let us say that after careful reflection, you think the balance of moral reasons tells you that you ought to do x, rather than y. But then the Local Spiritual Assembly (LSA), after independent consideration, tells you that the balance of moral reasons means that you ought to do y, and commands you to do this. Now, on the account of the legitimacy involved in the dual claim we are examining, the LSA, as a legitimate authority, does not simply add one more reason to the balance of reasons in favour of doing y. Rather, (1) its authoritative command provides a reason for action that preempts – replaces and overrides – all other reasons in the previous balance of reasons that you were considering; i.e., you ought to do y. The LSA telling you that the balance of moral reasons requires y might also provide you with a reason for believing that the original balance of moral reasons was in favour of y after all. But the second part of the dual claim above says that (2) the LSA does not provide you with a peremptory reason for belief – in other words, you might still believe that the LSA's evaluation of the original balance of reasons was mistaken, but (1) your reason for action (in accordance with the command of the LSA) is independent of that belief, because the LSA's authority is legitimate.

What is important about the above is not that one accepts the philosophical claim about the nature of (an LSA's) legitimacy; rather, what is important, for the purposes of this essay, is that one understands the difference between peremptory and non-peremptory reasons, and between reasons for action and reasons for belief. These distinctions are discussed more fully by Joseph Raz, The Morality of Freedom, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.

3. Of course, this is an ancient debate, going at least as far back as Plato (cf. Euthyphro 10a).

4. A fallibilistic qualification is due even here. Because our understandings of the Writings are always subject to the fallible limitations of our own interpretations, this means that

even those interpretations, which give rise to reasons for belief, must always be held to be subject to revision.

5. I should also like to make brief reference to appeals to "faith" in moral argument. Appeals to faith to settle moral questions have almost exactly the same structure as appeals to the divine say-so; indeed, this essay could have been written, in much the same form, about appeals to faith. Just as the faulty appeal to the divine say-so that I have tried to identify here often serves as a way of ending further moral reflection and consultation, so too does a faulty appeal to faith as the justification for some ethical claim. It is a fundamental Baha'is belief, as I understand it, that faith has an important role in moral life. For example, just as appeals to the divine say-so may partially explain our reason for belief, an appeal to faith may also partially explain that belief, or even better, help explain our reason for action. But, as this essay has attempted to argue, neither an appeal to the divine say-so, nor an appeal to faith, plays a role in the philosophical justification of particular moral principles (as the doctrine of immediate application would have us believe). Such appeals might, on the other hand, partially account for one's commitment to an ethical theory as a whole, though this essay has failed to argue for a position on this question one way or the other.

Thanks to that troublemaker, "mavaddat" on Baha'i LJ forum for the tip 🙂

No related posts.

Bill Davis Comment On UHJ April 19th Letter

Bill Davis at the US National Convention asking the delegates to bury the NSA's own letter and instead focus the attention of Baha'is on the UHJ's letter:

What is this all about?

US NSA Annual Report – Ridvan 2007

House of Justice Letter April 19 2007 – Response To NSA US

Counsellor Rebequa Murphy's Comment At Convention

Mr. William E. Davis

Former Chairperson

National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States of America

Blurry Red Lines

I found this recent article on Iran from the Times Online website rather interesting. Especially in the last few paragraphs were it describes the approach of the Islamic government of Iran towards censorship:

> The way censorship works in Iran is that the rules are deliberately kept vague. Something that sneaks through one week is then used later as a catalyst for a crack-down. What is acceptable and what not changes constantly: the blurry red lines foster a climate of self-censorship more powerful than any rules.

Sadly, this is also a succint description of the way Baha'i pre-publication "review" works. There are no clearly defined lines. In fact, they would bristle at the word 'censorship' being applied to what they do. But the outcome of the process is the same as that in the Islamic Repulic of Iran: within the Baha'i community there is no academic freedom, nor is there freedom of the press.

And by keeping the mechanism and process as vague as possible, the result is that a state of fear is produced. Academics, authors and all creatives begin to self-censor themselves much more readily and to a deeper extent simply because they don't quite know where the

lines are. If one day a Baha'i of many years can be thrown out of the community for calling himself a 'Baha'i theologian', then who knows what's next?

Here is an excellent article by Barney Leith on pre-publication review.

In case the link to the Times article kicks the bucket, here is the complete article:

This is Iran, but not as you know it

Young Iranians are doing more to transform their country than any outside agency could do, writes Rageh Omaar

It might have been hot, but it was going to take much more than the familiar Tehran cocktail of unrelenting heat and choking smog to deter the 20 or so young Iranian women gathered outside the record shop. Beethoven's isn't exactly the sort of name you would expect of a hip music store. But this is Tehran, and as with most things involving young Iranians today, even a seemingly boring name hides something far more subversive.

All the young women are in manteaus, the figure-hugging three-quarter length jacket worn as a substitute for the chador. But underneath they sport tight white jeans, Versace print head-scarves, designer sunglasses and delicate sandals, the thin straps of which wrap around perfectly painted toenails.

A brand new silver Mercedes glides up and an androgynous young man clad in trendy black gets out. Behind him walks a confident man in his late thirties who shepherds the younger man past the adoring female fans. A ripple of excitement goes through the crowd as the girls recognise the young man while some hold up their mobile phones to take pictures and video clips of him in the crush.

Were it not for the head-scarves and manteaus, it could easily have been Robbie Williams outside HMV. Welcome to the vibrant and almost completely unnoticed world of Iranian pop music.

Tehran is one of the most talked about cities in the world; many people believe it could well be the next target for the Bush administration's third invasion in its so-called "war on terror". The majority of the limited reports and images to have emerged from the Iranian capital in the past year have been about alleged nuclear weapons programmes, senior members of Iran's theocratic state and, of course, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Very little has been said that accurately describes this nation of 70m, which is one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse countries in the Middle East. Despite a recorded history of more than 5,000 years, making it one of the oldest civilisations on earth, Iran remains shackled to a small number of clich?s; turbaned mullahs, women wearing the black chador and antiwestern rhetoric.

As a news correspondent this Iran was familiar to me. I'd seen many angry rallies postFriday prayers and done interviews with politicians and military figures. But I longed to show the unseen and hugely varied life of ordinary people in Tehran; one of the least understood cities on earth.

I had a personal reason for doing this, too. There have been many times over the past year or so where the accelerating crisis over Iran has reminded me of the relentless build-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2002. The similarities are chilling; accusations of the development of WMDs, allegations of sponsoring terrorism, and military reinforcements being sent to the region while leading Bush administration officials consistently speak of the need for the world to be prepared for preemptive action.

I reported from inside Iraq for several years before the invasion and I regret enormously that while I did endless stories about Saddam, his regime, weapons inspectors and suchlike I spoke very little about ordinary Iraqis; what role religious and sectarian beliefs played in their identity, what they made of the exiled politicians groomed by Washington as their leaders in waiting.

I wanted to make sure that mistake was not repeated. It took a year of wrangling with the authorities to be able to follow the lives of ordinary Iranians without restrictions or minders, but I was given an extraordinary opportunity.

Iran has one of the youngest populations in the world; around 70% of its citizens are under the age of 30. That means 70% of Iranians have no memory of life under the Shah, and have grown up under the rules of the Islamic republic. For them there is the profound sense that nearly 30 years after Ayatollah Khomeini led the world's first Islamic revolution the rebellion has to renew itself to become relevant to their generation.

So in Iran at the moment there is a unique situation where an Islamic theocracy is being challenged, scrutinised and publicly questioned in a way that very few other regimes in the Middle East are. This is not just happening in Iran's parliament and the active media; it is

being done in the streets, in people's homes, and even by what citizens wear and how they express themselves.

The pop star I met at Beet-hoven's record shop was called Benyamin and the analogy with Robbie Williams is pretty accurate. Benyamin is currently the hot young thing in Iranian pop music. Mohsen Rajabpour, his manager, is Tehran's Simon Cowell — and is a match for his English counterpart in every way. The last person I expected to hang out with in Tehran was a pop svengali cum entrepreneur.

"The difference between me and this Englishman [Cowell] is that he is not restricted in making his pop stars," said Rajabpour as we glided around in his Mercedes. "Mine must be created within the restrictions of Iran."

But this hasn't stopped him producing a number of highly successful pop acts. The restrictions are ones you'd expect. "I can't do songs that are about hot sexy topics," but despite this his acts find ways of pushing back the boundaries with each record.

The key to Rajabpour's success and why he is an unlikely modern revolutionary is that he succeeds as a pop entrepreneur by having a very good grasp of the laws and jurisprudence of the Islamic republic. He's now working on what he thinks is the perfect rock band for Iran.

"It has the usual things: drums, bass, guitars . . . but with girls!" They're going to be Iran's answer to the Spice Girls, but with a very different kind of girl power. The law says that the lead vocalist in a publicly approved rock band cannot be a girl. His trick is that all members of the band are vocalists, so it can't be said that the lead vocalist is a girl. It is in thousands of such small tests of change that Iranians from all walks of life are transforming their country.

Bozorgmehr Sharafeddin is the editor of Chelcheragh, one of Tehran's best known weekly youth magazines. Still in his twenties, he leads a constantly changing group of 40 or so young Iranian men and women journalists. The topics range from politics and culture to music and comedy. In the midst of Benyamin's appearance at Beethoven's, the editor quizzed me about my documentary and I explained that I wanted to follow the lives of ordinary Iranians.

"So," he said with a wicked grin, "you are on mission impossible." He paused briefly then said: "Why don't you write an article for our magazine as a guest reporter? It's the best way for you to get as deep into Iranian society as possible."

I duly attended the magazine's editorial meeting where I was quizzed by staff and given a stark insight into the constant battle they face with the censors and the threat of the magazine being suspended or shut down.

Iranian journalists call them "red lines", the opaque and constantly shifting guidelines by which the state clamps down on publications. My article was going to be edited by Sharafeddin and any sensitive or risky comments would be cut.

I said I wanted to write a feature profiling three prominent young women: Nazila Noe-bashari (who runs a transportation company employing many men), Newsha Tavakolian (a renowned photojournalist I met in Iraq) and Ghazal Chegini (who works in Iran's huge nongovernmental organisations network for a charity caring for children with cancer).

The three of them allowed us into their lives and homes in Tehran and took us around their city. I discovered a mass of contradictions. Tehran has one of the highest rates of cosmetic surgery among young people and terrible poverty. One day I went to a pro-Hezbollah protest in the morning and a recording studio with Benyamin in the afternoon. Women cannot ride motorcycles, but in the glitzy shopping malls of the affluent northern suburbs young men with earrings openly court girls.

I went back to Sharafeddin to go through my article. Various lines and paragraphs had been crossed out and the changes revealed a lot about the republic. For example, my comment about women not being allowed to ride motorcycles in Tehran was changed to "in Tehran there are no women motorcyclists".

The reason? My original sentence laid too much emphasis on the government's restrictive rule. Another comment, on how Iranian women wear what they want in their homes but outside wear a headscarf (which, it seemed to me, meant they were hiding their identities behind a mask), was rejected and changed to "women felt they were having to take on different identities".

The way censorship works in Iran is that the rules are deliberately kept vague. Something that sneaks through one week is then used later as a catalyst for a crack-down. What is

acceptable and what not changes constantly: the blurry red lines foster a climate of self-censorship more powerful than any rules.

And yet it is the millions of largely young Iranians who are forcing through a slow but surely unstoppable transformation in the country. Sometimes at a terrible cost to imprisoned journalists and human rights activists, the restrictions are being rolled back. But the quickest way to reverse this progress is for the West to attack.

Breaking News: Rocket Hits Baha'i Gardens

There are reports that the Baha'i gardens on Mount Carmel have been hit. Thankfully there were no casualties.

Nothing official has come from either the Universal House of Justice (internal) nor the Baha'i News Service (external). The latest public news release is about a Baha'i school in Tonga.

In any case, every Baha'i living and serving in Haifa is assumed to be in bunkers waiting this out. Our prayers and thoughts go to them and everyone else in harms way. May God's hand protect them.

Daily Express article excerpt:

> Hezbollah targets included Acre, the ancient Crusader city of Richard the Lion Heart and home to Arabs and Jews alike. One rocket landed in the holy gardens of the Bahai Temple.There were no casualties.

San Francisco Chronicle article excerpt:

> In fact, the seemingly indiscriminate Hezbollah rocket attacks have targeted both Jewish and Arab towns throughout northern Israel, including Acre, the ancient Crusader city of Richard the Lionheart and home to Arabs and Jews alike. One rocket hit the holy gardens of the Bahai Temple. There were no casualties.

Canadian NSA Election – 2011

The delegates at the National Convention in Canada re-elected every single previous member of their National Spiritual Assembly. These included the two new members that were the result of the 20 December 2010 by-election (Simon Grandy and Dr. Mehran Anvari).

The members of the Canadian NSA are:

Karen McKye
Deloria Bighorn
Enayat Rawhani
Simon Grandy
Judy Filson
Elizabeth Wright
Mehran Anvari
Gordon Naylor
Susanne Tamas

So once again, yet another confirmation of the death-grip that incumbency has on Baha'i elections. The longest continuous members are: Judy Filson (+16 years), Enayat Rohani (+16 years), Karen McKye (+14 years) and Susanne Tamas (+14 years). The average consecutive years in office is 9 – meaning that the average member of the NSA of Canada has been a member for 9 years non-stop.

A few weeks before the National Convention and the Canadian federal elections, the Canadian Baha'i News agency (a body of the Canadian NSA) featured a commentary comparing the Baha'i elections and the upcoming secular ones in Canada titled "Innovative electoral model employed by Baha'is".

The article contrasted the Baha'i election process (devoid of campaigning) with the partisan nature of the political election taking place with its usual mud-slinging. But the article also had an unmistakeable whiff of self-aggrandizement:

> Although the Canadian political system reflects well fundamental democratic reforms that have served to advance humanity's ability to govern itself, it is not without its challenges. Cynicism and apathy about the Canadian electoral system seem to have reached a new high, especially among younger voters. Some political scientists have attributed this apathy to a general decline in interest in institutional democracy.

What happened to humility being the watchword?

Of course, there are very real differences between Baha'i elections and the federal elections. Each one is different in nature and for a different purpose. This does not mean that one is inherently "better" than the other or that one method or process should be adopted in lieu of the other.

The difference that I see between the two goes beyond the superficial ones that the Canadian Baha'i News article mentioned. Whereas Baha'is never discuss or question their own election process or how to improve it, the federal election process is very much discussed. Especially since the recent one resulted in a majority government that did not gain the popular vote. Many Canadians are rightfully asking if they need electoral reform to align the democratic will of the citizenry more precisely with the outcome of elections.

This is open engagement and willingness to both acknowledge shortcomings and to address them is completely lacking in the Baha'i community right now. Instead we are complacent and unwilling to acknowledge the real challenges and deficiencies of Baha'i elections.

The problem of incumbency is probably the most glaring. The very thing which Baha'is are proud of is in fact a cause of this weakness. Because Baha'i elections do not allow campaigning, the current members of the NSA gain a *defacto* advantage because they are known to the community and their names are often marked with an asterisk or other identifier on the document sent along with ballots that lists the community members eligible for election. The result of the phenomena is evident at all levels of Baha'i election, from the local to the international.

So before we start throwing stones around, let's first be cognizant that our own dwelling is primarily built out of glass. And let's start to have a serious and intelligent discussion about how we can improve Baha'i elections. Exhortations of the kind that we've seen from the Universal House of Justice simply are not enough to solve deep structural deficiencies. One idea is both simple and effective: term limits. There are others of course. The important thing is to engage in an open and honest dialogue.

Did someone mention cynicism and apathy?

The other challenge facing Baha'i elections is extremely low participation rates. Baha'is may be surprised to learn that the participation rates at this federal election far outnumber the participation rates of Baha'i elections. This has also been the case historically. Talk

about cynicism and apathy! Baha'is are not engaged with the election process because they do not believe that their vote counts. The same people are re-elected year in and year out.

So again, before you throw stones…

A brilliant example of the dichotomy between the two approaches is that today, UK voters are going to the polls to vote on a referendum about their voting system. Say what you will about "partisan politics". Whatever the outcome of the referendum, the fact that it was held shows an admirable willingness to be flexible and attempt to change and improve. As a Baha'i, I wish these were characteristics that were evident from Baha'i communities with regards to elections (and other community matters).

It is also important to note that the Baha'i election, in contrast to the myth believed by most Baha'is, is not "set in stone" but can be adapted and improved upon. The current election process that we employ at Baha'i communities around the world is markedly different from that first put in practice at the time of Baha'u'lah or Abdu'l-Baha. They of course share certain principles, such as secret ballot and no campaigning, but many other things are different.

So it is not true to argue that we are unable to make modifications (such as term limits or changes like the UK proposed AV+ voting system). Personally, I don't have a single solution that I'm advocating *per se*. The more important idea is that we should consider these ideas seriously and once informing ourselves, begin to engage in a meaningful conversation about it in true Baha'i consultation.

In case you're curious, there are literally dozens of method we can use for elections. Here is a simple list and description, each with advantages and disadvantages. For more information on the proposed AV+ system being voted on today in the UK, see this.

Here's a video that explains it quite concisely:

Canadian NSA Ignores Surplus, Issues Fund Appeal

Well that didn't take too long.

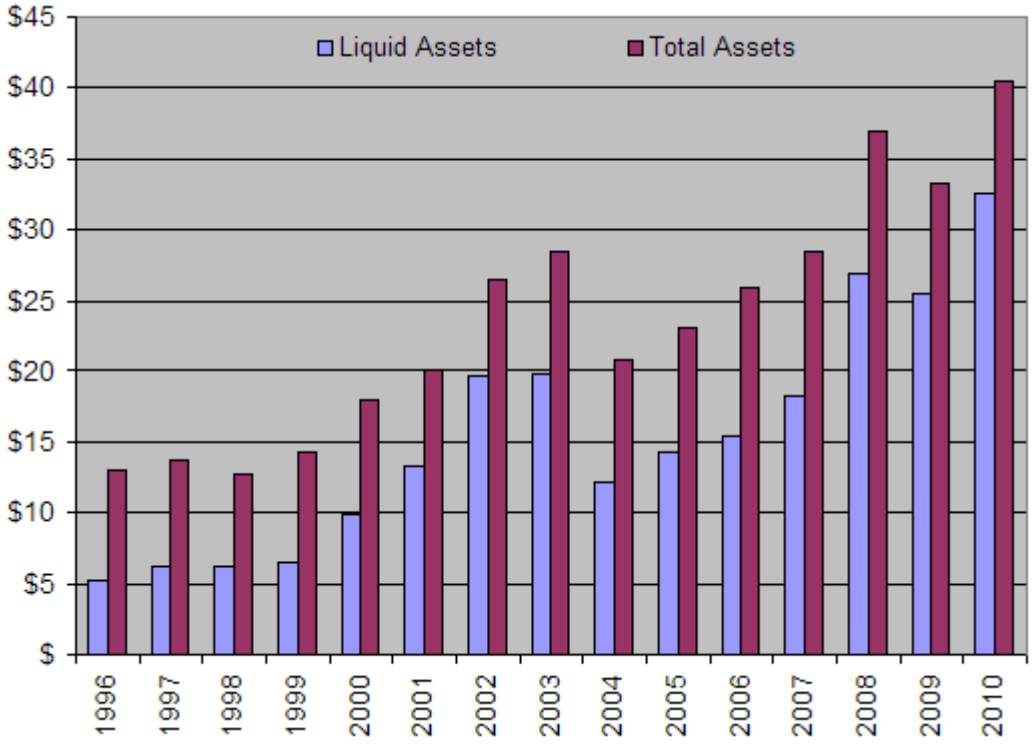
The Canadian National Spiritual Assembly's Treasurer, Mr. Enayat Rawhani, issued this letter recently:

> At its recent meeting, the National Spiritual Assembly reviewed the financial position of the Canadian community as part of the formulation of a budget that would provide for activities related to the first year of the new Five Year Plan. A thrilling picture of Canada's contribution to the growth of the Faith emerged from our review. At the same time, we noted with growing concern that the needs have substantially exceeded the flow of contributions to the national fund. Over the last few months, therefore, the National Assembly has drawn from funds set aside from bequests and endowments so that commitments to other funds of the Cause and the movement of the Plan in Canada may not be impeded. Examples include increased contributions to the House of Worship in Chile, an historic restoration of the Shrine in Montreal in preparation for the centenary of the visit of "Abdu'l-Baha, the winning of Canada's international pioneer goals through the settlement of a large number of pioneers, international collaborative projects in Congo and Burkina, and of course, the personnel and operational costs of the processes of growth throughout the country.
>
> Contributions to the fund fluctuate throughout the year, but by the end of March, the Assembly can usually foresee whether the contributions will meet the year's needs. This year, contributions as of the end of March had reached $4,000,000, an amount which fell $700,000 short of the year-to-date expenditure budget. This gap moved us to immediately share the state of affairs with you, calling for a supreme effort to remedy this condition and in fact, welcome the new Plan at Ridvan with a surplus.

You can read the Treasurer's full letter here. Interestingly enough, Rawhani is one of the longest serving members of the NSA with more than 16 years of continuous incumbency under his belt. But only the two most recent have seen him serve as Treasurer for the national body.

Most Baha'is will find nothing in the above letter surprising or out of the ordinary. After all, we are all used to receiving such exhortations about the fund. They are usually delivered with a breathless tone of impending doom and gloom. If we don't immediately give sacrificially, who knows what will happen!

So why do I say, "well that didn't take long?". Because we just reviewed the financial situation of the Baha'i community. Based on the NSA's own disclosure to the Canadian tax authorities, we know that the Canadian Baha'i community is doing very well financially. This is a chart that I shared with you already:



Total liquid assets have been growing consistently and the NSA now has more than $32.5 million. If we count non-liquid assets such as land and buildings, then it is more than that by a few million.

In fact, just a few days ago, I wrote this:

> I hope that with this warchest, the NSA doesn't resort to the past manufactured financial crisis situations to motivate Baha'is to donate.

From the NSA's own disclosures to the CRA, here is a concise summary of their annual financial status going back to 1996:

Year	Total Income	Total Disbursements	Surplus/(Deficit)
1996	$10,128,341	$10,374,676	($246,335)
1997	$9,678,961	$7,864,324	$1,814,637
1998	$7,937,466	$7,485,086	$452,380
1999	$9,631,089	$9,090,259	$540,830
2000	$11,635,916	$8,052,783	$3,583,133
2001	$10,059,902	$7,646,536	$2,413,366
2002	$17,462,503	$11,057,848	$6,404,655
2003	$9,707,904	$9,603,921	$103,983
2004	$11,910,620	$9,603,921	$2,306,699
2005	$10,804,786	$8,877,218	$1,927,568
2006	$13,698,757	$12,760,130	$938,627
2007	$18,984,048	$16,177,993	$2,806,055
2008	$16,277,836	$7,953,414	$8,324,422
2009	$14,389,555	$19,888,513	($5,498,958)
2010	$14,980,518	$12,178,743	$2,801,775

The NSA has consistently banked surplus after surplus, year after year. The cumulative net surplus over this time period is $28.7 million which would account for almost all the accumulated liquid assets that the NSA has at this point.

The only time there was a large deficit was in 2009 when they decided to contribute $12.5 million to the Chile Temple project. This created a $5.5 million deficit. Without this there would have been a surplus of $7.5 million. This donation to the Chile project provided another interesting discrepancy that is yet to be explained.

There is just one month remaining in the Baha'i fiscal year so the above letter can be seen as a 'Hail Mary' to try to get Baha'is to donate within this window of opportunity to

prevent a $700,000 deficit. What I balk at here is not the letter itself in isolation. But that it is merely one among many similar letters that present a completely different picture and tone to that which the NSA itself reports to the Canadian government. We've seen many similar letters sent to the community during previous years when the fund ultimately presented a surplus.

I balk at the selective disclosure that the NSA engages in to reinforce informational asymmetry within the Baha'i community. They have never disclosed the full financial situation. They have never reported the true financial status of the community to the members of the community. They never report the balance sheet which would then show the massive and growing assets, both liquid and capital of the NSA. They never report the full income statement nor explain what exactly they are doing with the funds or how they are making decisions about them.

The pattern of behavior exhibited by the NSA is one of extremely limited disclosure coupled with intermittent jeremiads, like the one above, bemoaning the state of the fund and asking for further donations to avert a crisis. I find this wholly contemptible.

Chile Baha'i Temple Video

This is a new video showcasing the **Baha'i temple in Chile**, Santiago:

This short video (about 8 minutes long) features the architect of the temple, Hariri, talking about the concept behind the design of the temple. The structure looks simply stunning.

> **Whensoever the light of Manifestation of the King of Oneness settleth upon the throne of the heart and soul, His shining becometh visible in every limb and member. At that time the mystery of the famed tradition gleameth out of the darkness: "A servant is drawn unto Me in prayer until I answer him; and when I have answered him, I become the ear wherewith he heareth…." For thus the Master of the house hath appeared within His home, and all the pillars of the dwelling are ashine with His light. And the action and effect of the light are from the Light-Giver; so it is that all move through Him and arise by His will. And this is that spring whereof the**

near ones drink, as it is said: "A fount whereof the near unto God shall drink…."

Related:

- Chile Temple Category

  (where you'll find all the content of this blog on the Chile Temple)

Chile Temple Finally Underway

The Baha'i House of Worship in Chile is finally underway. According to a recent interview with the CBC, the firm of Soheil Mosun has started to manufacture the necessary components to graft together the massive transluscent walls of the building.

No word yet how things are going on the ground in Chile but we can assume that things are going well since the special firm of Soheil Mosun would never be commissioned to start otherwise.

You can read the CBC article here.

Chile Temple Takes Shape

Since the previous time I wrote about the Chile temple, another step has been taken towards its ultimate completion. The Canadian firm of Soheil Mosun has finished building and testing a 1/6th scale model of one of the nine petals that will surround the temple.

Apparently they had some glitches to work out over 7 months as the software they were using is normally used for aeronautical testing. The good news is that after "extensive and detailed testing" the model seems to be accurate enough that fabrication on full scale can begin.

It will take approximately two to three years to manufacture the pieces in Canada. Afterwards they will be shipped to Chile for final assembly. This may seem like an odd way to build such a structure but it turned out to be the most cost effective solution among the options considered.

On site construction work is planned to begin in October 2008. All in all, it is safe to estimate atleast 4 years before the temple is completed at an estimated cost of US $27 million.

Chlamydomonas Flagella

A grilled cheese sandwich with the image of the Virgin Mary, the Holy Mother of God, toasted on its side is a tough act to follow but with a brave face, Baha'is have combed the universe and come up with the following entry:

It is a microscopic image of chlamydomonas flagella, which is a very small tiny part of something organic. If you still have questions don't bother us, your friendly neighbourhood microbiologist can tell you all about it. The important thing isn't *what it is* the important thing is what it looks like. And as you can see it has a nine pointed star and as a bonus the Arabic/Persian letter -ha at the end. And also notice that "chlamydomonas flagella" has 21 letters, take away 1 (for each word) and you get 19. Coincidence? I think not!

Here are some other images of chlamydomonas flagella (but they don't count, because they don't have 9 pointy things nor the Arabic/Persian letter -ha). Don't click on that link. It will just confuse you and possibly lead you to question your belief in chlamydomonas flagella.

No related posts.

Christmas Cheer

It is that time of the year again! You know, when Baha'is start wringing their hands about whether they should celebrate Christmas. Or just how much 'celebrating' is too much…is getting a tree too much? what about exchanging gifts? Oh my Gosh! What about sipping eggnog? In the Yahoo! Group: Unenrolled Baha'i there's a discussion about the approach of Baha'is (enrolled and unenrolled) towards Christmas. And in the LiveJournal Baha'i forum there was a recent question about the same.

Since I never officially celebrated Christmas with my family growing up, I don't know what I'm missing. We never had a tree, never hung mistletoe, nor stockings. Our house was immaculately bereft of all festive paraphenalia. And yet, I never once got the impression that the celebration of Christmas by others (Christians, agnostics, atheists, Baha'is, etc.) was wrong or bad. Of course, I know that Shoghi Effendi gives guidance that Baha'is not celebrate Christmas but c'mon !

Asking Western Baha'is who have grown up seeped in the tradition of that jolly nordic saint with his toy sweatshop hidden in the arctic, is like asking Iranian Baha'is to stop celebrating Chahar-Shanbeh Soori. After all, they are both un-Baha'i; having nothing to do with the Faith and having both lost so much of their original significance. And yet, in both cases, people just can't stop continuing the traditions.

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In case you're not familiar with it, Chahar-Shanbeh Soori is an ancient festival (probably preceding Zoroastrian times) which literally translated means the *Last Wednesday of the Year*. There's a lot of different activities (like Christmas) but the most famous one and the most visually spectacular is undertaken on Tuesday night. Imagine the streets coming alive with children and people as families spill out of their homes and greet each other. Soon fathers are seen congregating with sticks, tinder and other flammable objects. Before you know it, roaring bonfires are lit and people gather around them.

Then suddenly someone is the first to go; taking a running start and jumping over the fire they yell 'Sorkhie to az man… Zardieh man az to'. Literally: 'Your redness to me … my yellowness to you'. This rhyme complements this ancient purification ritual where the healthy glow of the fire is beseeched to bless the person and to take away all their maladies and ills.

Another activity associated with Chahar-Shanbeh Soori is when people wear strange costumes – usually wrapping themselves up in sheets to symbolize the shrouds of the dead – and head out into the street armed with pots and pans to create a cacophony you will never forget. As the saying goes, they could wake the dead! And that's pretty much the intention; this ancient ritual is said to ward off evil spirits. For their trouble the kids then go door to door and receive treats – heaven help the poor soul who isn't liberal with the treats. They probably won't be left alone to sleep a wink that night. And here you thought that the West had a monopoly on Halloween, didn't you?

As you can well imagine, the fundamental Muslims in Iran view all of this as peccant pagan rituals which defile the Islamic purity in their society. For more than 25 years (since the 1979 revolution) they have made futile attempts to stop people from celebrating Chahar-Shanbeh Soori. They have beaten people, imposed curfews, thrown people in jail….all to no avail. This ancient tradition is just too deeply bred in the bone. Something ingrained in the psyche of the Iranian society for thousands of years can not be simply erased by two measly decades.

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So that's what I think of when talk turns to Baha'is celebrating Christmas in the West. Isn't it hypocritical that Baha'is in Iran celebrate by jump over bonfires and no one bats an eyelash but suddenly when the same Baha'i family comes over to the US they get all uppity when they see the North American Baha'is putting up and decorating a coniferous tree?

That's why I say, relaaaaaax. Chill out Dorothy! You're not in Kansas anymore. Grab a cup of eggnog and learn a few of those silly Christmas carols.

Then after its all over, see if you can suggest to your neighbourhood a new way to dispose of all those dried up Christmas trees (hint: tree=wood).

Related Links:

Wikipedia article on Chahar Shanbeh Soori.

An article explaining the different activities of Chahar Shanbeh Soori.

"Code Red"

This is a modified version of an originally a post I made to Talisman

If you've been around enough in Baha'i circles you have the unfortunate circumstance to see some unpleasantries. Nothing unusual in that, all organizations no matter their nature or size have some negative stuff. What I mean by that general term are situations where misunderstandings or misapplications of procedure or regulations puts a Baha'i in

disagreement with the AO (or some of their agencies and bodies). In each of these cases it is the individual who is bullied and pushed around (no matter what the circumstances, the AO never acknowledges that it may be wrong or mistaken). Sadly, there have been many of these over the years and with the marvel of the internet, Baha'is have been able to read about such cases where they wouldn't normally be privy to the information.

After being exposed to quite a few of these ugly experiences (mine and others) I found a common denominator that seems to run through all of them. And that is when the person wronged tells their side, they are pelted with demands of 'proof'. No matter what they say, defenders of the AO will not accept anything except their version of 'proof'. That is they want a certain condition or conditions to be fulfilled before they will consider the possiblity that the AO did anything remotely wrong or damaging to an individual believer. We saw this with the tragic case of Shirin, where the only thing that seemed to help was the threat of public exposure for the irresponsible and borderline criminal behaviour of the AO.

I can understand the intention of such demands for proof. No one likes it when someone comes up with empty allegations and accusations. Believe me, I've been on the receiving end of it quite a bit and its not a great feeling. What I disagree with is the demand that the proof furnished be in an exact type and format. In fact, this whole thing made me immediately think of a scene in "A Few Good Men". If you haven't seen it, the general premise of the movie is an investigation into the suspicious death of a soldier in Guantanamo Bay (Gitmo). We learn that the incident which caused his death is called a 'code red' and is intended to be an internal mechanism to force conformity and loyalty within the unit.

The scene that I refer to is in the military trial where the defense attorney (Kevin Bacon as ROSS)tries to sabotage the prosecutor's (Tom Cruise as KAFEE) whole strategy by attempting to deny that a 'code red' even exists. Here is the relevant part out of the script:

ROSS takes three books out of his briefcase and puts them on
the table. He brings one to HOWARD.

ROSS
Corporal Howard, I hold here The Marine
Guide and General Information Handbook for

New Recruits. Are you familiar with this book?

HOWARD
Yes sir.

ROSS
Have you read it?

HOWARD
Yes sir.

ROSS
Good.
(hands him the book)
Would you turn to the chapter that deals with code reds, please.

HOWARD
Sir?

ROSS
Just flip to the page in that book that discusses code reds.

HOWARD
Sir, you see, Code Red is a term we use– it's just used down at GITMO, sir. I don't know if it actually–

ROSS has produced another book.

ROSS
We're in luck, then. The Marine Corps Guide for Sentry Duty, NAVY BASE Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. I assume we'll find the term code red and its definition in this book, am I correct?

HOWARD
No sir.

ROSS
No? Corporal Howard, I'm a marine. Is their no book, no manual or pamphlet, no set of orders or regulations that let me know that, as a marine, one of my duties is to perform code reds?

HOWARD
(pause)
No sir. No books, sir.

ROSS
No further questions.

ROSS sits. **KAFFEE** walks over to **ROSS**'s table and picks up one of the books. He brings it to HOWARD.

KAFFEE
Corporal, would you turn to the page in this book that says where the enlisted men's mess hall is?

HOWARD
Lt. Kaffee, that's not in the book, sir.

KAFFEE
I don't understand, how did you know where the enlisted men's mess hall was if it's not in this book?

HOWARD
I guess I just followed the crowd at chow time, sir.

KAFFEE
No more questions.

KAFFEE chucks the book back on **ROSS**'s desk.

What's my point? Well, 'code reds' by their very nature are not written down or documentable. But that doesn't mean they don't happen. Unfortunately, there have been 'code reds' in the Baha'i Faith, which causes me great anquish and sadness. The latest one that we all found out about was Larry's case.

My heart goes out to anyone who has been the victim of the misguided, who in their false understanding of the AO, have chosen to inflict upon them their imperfect understanding and demand conformity.

Some deny emphatically that such bullying happens within the Baha'i community but many others concede that such 'code reds' do, unfortunately, occur within the Baha'i Faith, but they say, if such incidences do occur, they are but the personal and mistaken acts of individuals and do not reflect at all on the AO or the Faith. Basically, I agree with this. Individuals can make mistakes and we should not generalize and blame the AO or the Faith for their errors.

But here is my problem with such reasoning in this case. Were such 'code reds' to occur once or twice in a blue moon, I could forgive it and look the other way. Were such 'code reds' to be condemned later by the AO and the persons instigating them chastised, and removed from offices of authority and power, I could forgive it and look the otherway. Were such 'code reds' to be reversed, the victim given a full, written and official apology, I could forgive it and look the other way.

However, when instead I see that there is a protracted pattern of bullying by people in the AO and nothing has been done about it, it concerns me. When I see that those individual's are not punished but instead are given a silent message of approval and often are promoted to higher office and authority, it concerns me. When I see that such bullying behaviour is quitely encouraged (Baha'is are asked to be ever vigilant and spy on their fellow believers), I am alarmed and saddened. Then I can no longer, in good conscience, separate the persons who are doing those things and saying those things, and the AO itself.

In my next few posts I hope to tell the story of a ‘code red’ that I learned about just recently. To protect the innocent I will not use the names of the persons involved or the location. But it is a true story and I want to tell it because it illustrates that for every ‘code red’ that we do hear about (such as Larry’s or Alison’s or Juan’s….) there are many, many others who we don’t.

No related posts.

Commentary on McGlinn’s Unenrollment

Many moons ago when I was quite young and had yet not heard of any ‘heretical’ ideas… Back when the internet was just a twinkle in the eyes of DARPA nerds (I mean scientists)… back when the only way most Baha’is would hope to hear anything interesting would be to attend conferences or live in California. Back when innocence reigned…

I remember going to a particular youth conferences with a few friends. One night, we went out to socialize in a coffee shop that the conference attendees frequented. After all, that is really the main purpose of conferences from the perspective of the typical Baha’i youth. We sat down at a table which was next to another group of older Baha’i youth and with the help of one of our group who knew them, started talking to them. When we huddled together again at our own table, my friend lowered his voice and said that ‘so-and-so’ (one of the older youth we had just met) had recently resigned as a Baha’i. We were shocked because eventhough we didn’t know him personally, we knew that the person in question had impressive Baha’i ‘pedigree’. He was also quite intelligent as he was attending one of the best universities around and doing a double major to boot. Our connection to the older group then explained that he had resigned because he didn’t believe in something called *theocracy*. I felt sheepish but mustered the question outloud and was told, *He doesn’t believe that Baha’is will or should run things, you know, like the government.* Unfortunately this didn’t help because I couldn’t really wrap my mind around this novel and strange idea. *Why would Baha’is want to run the government or be the government?*, I thought to myself, feeling rather ignorant.

I also remember thinking, *Man, that’s silly! Why would you resign just based on that? Especially when you father is…* Being a teenager, my thoughts soon wandered off in other

directions. No doubt, aided in part, by the arrival of a gaggle of Baha'i youth of the opposite sex.

It was many years later that I realized that, on that night, I had had my first brush with the controversial issue of theocracy and had inadvertantly, met my first unenrolled Baha'i.

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Alison has published a commentary by Juan Cole, from H-Baha'i, regarding the recent unenrollment of Sen McGlinn. I look forward to reading her own thoughts as well (this is an audio – MP3 – file!). Karen has done likewise here and others, in different Baha'i forums, are discussing it as the hot topic of the day. Seeing that I'm composed enough now, below, I offer a few semi-coherent comments of my own.

The first thing I would like to comment on is the letter of the House of Justice regarding *takfir*.

As you'll notice in the beginning of the letter, the UHJ cautions against using quotes out of context because doing so may 'deliberately or inadvertantly' 'distort' its meaning or intention. I agree. And I wish they had followed their own advice when they selectively quoted McGlinn out of context and disseminated to all the NSAs the baseless allegation that he is claiming ecclesiastical rank.

The UHJ brushes aside any relevance to their act of unenrolling Baha'is by explaining that declaring someone *takfir* is something between persons and does not involve religious authorities. This is incorrect as declarations of *takfir* carried no weight unless they came from a religious authority (a Mullah, a Mujtahid, a Calyph, etc.). Their explanation gives the erroneous impression that Muslims walked around the street and, pointing to each other saying 'takfir, takfir', engaged in a surreal sort of religious tag. But since *takfir* was issued by a religious authority (otherwise it had no influence or effect) it is relevant for it to be compared to the act of throwing Baha'is out of their religious community. And as Abdu'l-Baha's clear words show, such practice is abolished in the Baha'i Faith.

Leaving aside such semantic arguments, I personally have difficulty in understanding the actions of the House in unenrolling Baha'is because I have difficulty in separating belief and membership.

When teaching a seeker, we ask them, do you believe? do you believe that Baha'u'llah is the Manifestation of God for today? do you believe that the Baha'i Faith is for you? and finally, do you want to be a Baha'i?

If they say yes, then they are a Baha'i.

But now, we are told that these two things: belief and membership, are two distinct and separate matters which are not up to the individual person but which can be determined and imposed by the House of Justice. That is, even if a person believes in Baha'u'llah and wishes to join His Faith, he can be denied by the House. Or if she already is a member in good standing and a lover of Baha'u'llah, she can be kicked out.

Furthermore, the process by which this decision is made is not clear; the method used, opaque and the justification, completely absent. It leaves me scratching my head. Why? Why is belief in Baha'u'llah not enough to choose to be a member of His community?

Why is it that while some profess belief, and voluntarily enter on that ground alone, others who profess the same belief are plucked up and thrown out?

If a person wishes to declare their belief in Baha'u'llah and not enroll as a Baha'i officially… I can understand that. After all it is their choice. But what I fail to understand is how those who do wish to be a part of the community and do declare belief, can be denied.

****

In the Aqdas, there are two requirements or duties outlined for every person: recognizing Baha'u'llah's station of Prophethood, and abiding by His laws. The two are inseparable. According to Baha'u'llah: one, without the other, is meaningless.

And yet, they are not events per se but rather processes. Or if you prefer, they are not destinations but rather journeys. Just as one can never instantly abide by God's laws but instead is continually forced to live life, day by day to face challenges; so are we also faced with the awsome opportunity of discovering Baha'u'llah's Revelation and His station (*irfan*).

This has deep implications for the whole issue of *takfir* or 'unenrollment'. As you know, Baha'is are not thrown out of their faith community if they fail to abide by God's law. They

are not declared to not be Baha'is by the recognized administrative authority of the Baha'i Faith if they steal, cheat, kill, defraud, etc.

If that *were* the case, I'm sure all Baha'is would be 'unenrolled' immediately (yours truly being the first to get the boot). But why, may I inquire are they not punished by being declared 'not Baha'i'? Haven't they all clearly shown by their actions that they did not abide by Baha'u'llah's words? Or is there one among us now who is a perfect Baha'i in every sense?

That Baha'is are not treated so is because we recognize that people are on a journey. We all acknowledge that we may fail here or there along this journey. But that is to be expected since we are frail and imperfect beings. What truly matters is that we have set out on a course and are struggling to live better lives by trying to be Baha'is in the full sense of that word.

It is for this reason that I'm confused why the same approach is not extended to its twin requirement (as set out in the first paragraph of the Aqdas). Assuming that the UHJ has the ability to somehow peer into our very hearts and souls to determine our belief in Baha'u'llah, why are Baha'is not given the same flexibility to fail and trundle along on this journey? Why are they thrown out of their communities and considered to not be worthy of the appellation *Baha'i* on their first stumble? Or isn't *irfan* also a journey?

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Finally, an attempt is made to shut down any and all discussion of these issues by claiming that this is a personal issue between Sen and the insitutions – meaning that it is none of other Bahai's business and we simply should close our yaps and not talk about it. First of all, McGlinn himself chose to share this with others. Second, while the intimate details of this situation are personal and Sen is due his privacy, the wider issue of unenrollment matters to all Baha'is. Especially when it is used as a tool to punish the expression of personal convictions regarding the Faith.

Related Links:

Letter of the House of Justice to the NSAs regarding McGlinn's book.

Message from the NSA of the Netherlands, communicating the decision of unenrollment by the House of Justice.

Alison's commentary in three parts: one, two, three.
Juan Cole's commentary from (H-Baha'i).
Karen's commentary.

No related posts.

Confirmation: Maxwell International To Close

About three months ago I was the first to break the sad story that the Maxwell Baha'i school in Canada would be closing after 20 years of operation.

Almost immediately, a group of students, faculty, alumni, student families and well-wishers joined together to come up with ideas to save the school. They wrote a proposal that would result in the continuation of the school and sent it to the national administrative body in charge.

Unfortunately, their proposal was rejected and the decision to close Maxwell Baha'i School was reiterated and finalized by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Canada.

In their letter (see below), the NSA refers to the lack of funds as one of the primary reasons for the decision. As I mentioned in my first story, the fund is really the heart of the matter here.

The Canadian Baha'i community, as well as the US counterpart are undergoing a severe cash crunch. Donations have fallen dramatically over the years and the NSAs have been reluctant or unable to cut back. But as with the decision to close Maxwell, difficult options are being forced on them.

While this specific cutback is a tragic setback for the Baha'i community in Canada (and the world, since Maxwell had international students)… the bigger picture beckons.

Why is the fund persistently low? Are the resources of the Faith being managed as best as they can be? What, if any, is the silent message that the Baha'i community as a group may be sending the administration by reducing their donations?

[Note: **bolded text** is my own emphasis]

24 January 2008 / 6 Sovereignty 164

Dear Friends,

The National Spiritual Assembly warmly appreciated the proposal and supporting documents forwarded for consideration at our January 18-20 meeting. You have made extraordinary efforts to meet the National Assembly's request for additional information related to your December 2007 proposal to continue the Maxwell International School as a Baha'i-inspired project, and have gained substantial support for the school's continuation.

The National Assembly gave careful and detailed attention to your proposal, including financial resources available to you, recruitment strategies, governance structure and management expertise. We have concluded with **regret that your submission is not sufficiently viable** to allow the school to succeed in what you describe as a highly competitive international market and ensure the security of the sacrificial investment of the friends in the project. In addition, it still calls for substantial investment on the National Assembly's part over a number of years, in the form of lost revenues. The **funds of the**

Faith cannot be used to undertake the commitments you would require, nor could the National Assembly accept the implied moral responsibility for the success of the project.

The Assembly is not asking you to revise and resubmit the proposal, as it is not in the best interests of the school or the Faith to prolong this process. Nonetheless, our representatives would be happy to meet with you in due course to answer any questions you may have. In the meantime, should you wish to offer explanation of the National Assembly's decision to other Maxwell supporters, we would appreciate your using this letter, in order to avoid misunderstanding and promote unity.

With warmest regards,
NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF THE BAHA'IS OF CANADA
Karen McKye, Secretary

cc: National Spiritual Assembly (9)
Board of Directors – Maxwell International School

Corruption and Espionage at the Indian NSA

Steve has linked to a story concerning the NSA of India by Hindustan Times recently.

> In a complaint filed in a city court, a few trustees of the National Spiritual Assembly of Bahais of India have been accused of espionage by their colleagues. Apparently, they were supplying classified documents from India's defence establishments to Israeli and Iranian spying agencies and making huge amounts in foreign currency.

My interpretation of this situation is that it is an internal power struggle and these accusations are merely a volley from one camp against another. The UHJ must be extremely embarrassed at this public airing of dirty laundry.

There have been similar incidents in the past but they have always been resolved privately. The UHJ has been struggling with the NSA of India for quite some time. It is no secret that

it is among, if not the most, corrupt and troubled NSA. The watchword of the UHJ has been patience and more patience. But they can not continue to be forebearing anymore. This is simply out of control.

Although this is totally an internal matter, and Baha'i Rants believes the charges to be totally false, the tragic consequence is that it will have far reaching effect outside of the Indian NSA's little turf war and do much damage to the Baha'i Faith. And specifically, put the Iranian Baha'is in even a more precarious situation.

UPDATE: NSA of India officially denies allegations as baseless.

Related:

- The Situation is Hopeless, But Not Serious

No related posts.

Declining Internet Interest for "Baha'i"

A while back we looked at the geographic breakdown of the data: Iranians Curious About "Bahai", Americans Not. I decided to go back and take a look at the pattern of search results for Baha'i.

Since Google is the king of internet when it comes to search, I was somewhat saddened to see that the number of worldwide searches for the keyword, "Baha'i" is continuing to decline. The chart below is from *Google Insight for Search* and it shows the incidence of people searching for the word Bahai on Google:

Since 2004 (the farthest Google has data) there has been a consistent decline in the number of Google searches for the term Baha'i. By the way, alternative spellings such as "bahai" provide the same results – Google is smart like that. Since Google loves numbers more than the Count, they crunch the numbers to come up with a short term forecast one year ahead (not visible in the chart above). Based on their forecast, the search index will decline from 39 (May 2010) to 33 in June 2011. You can see the chart including the forecast here.

To get some perspective we can compare this to, say, the term “Islam”. For starters, Islam’s index is flat, indicating a consistent level of online search interest. But I didn’t show the two together because there is so much more interest in the term “Islam” that the two plotted together on one index makes “Baha’i”‘s index basically unreadable.

Searching for other religions is also interesting. For example, the keyword “Judaism” shows a similar decline in popularity but the amount of search is higher than Baha’i. As well, there is an annual peak of interest that centers around Yom Kippur – the holiest of Jewish religious holidays.

So what inferences can we draw from this?

For starters, it is important to realize the importance of the internt. The reality is that the internet is a now an integral part of life in most developed countries. And with time, the integration and usefulness of the internet is only growing. So on the one hand, this trend tells us that within the Western, or wealthy nations, there is a decline in interest.

Considering the significant correlation between religiosity and wealth that isn’t surprising. As well, the Baha’i world center has for some time now targeted the less developed nations and developed programs such as Ruhi specifically to gain inroads within them.

Did You Ruhi Today?

Sometimes Baha’is get a bit carried away with Ruhi. **Click to embiggen the first Baha’i Rants comic:**

What do Baha’is get carried away with sometimes? _____

You should do what to embiggen the first Baha’i Rants comic? _____

Yay! Now you’re an A+ cluster.

Difference Between Proselytizing And Teaching

The above is a 25 minute video of a PBS series called "I Believe" which covers different religions. The host is Dennis Wholey who is interviewing Randolph Dobbs, a Baha'i from the Los Angeles area.

Most of the interview is softball questions about the general principles and serves as a good introduction for someone who doesn't know anything about the Baha'i Faith.

For me the interesting part is at the 21 minute mark (to which you can jump to by clicking and dragging chiclet) where the host asks,

> "How do you attempt to grow the Faith?"

To which Mr. Dobbs responds,

> "You know the message of the Baha'i Faith is shared from heart to heart. We talked about your mother and how she recognized the spiritual truth, that it resonated in her heart. We believe that people recognize truth when they hear it. And **although we don't proselytize, we don't go from door to door teaching the Baha'i Faith**, we do invite people to Baha'i meetings. We invite people to children's classes, to study circles, to devotional meetings."

The bold is my own emphasis to draw your attention to the excerpt.

It jumped out at me because lately I've been thinking about the difference between the two: proselytizing and teaching. I suppose for everyone it depends. We draw the line at different points and the behavior which you may categorize as teaching, another Baha'i may see clearly as proselytizing.

Although in the Baha'i writings we are prohibited from proselytizing, it isn't really defined nor clearly delineated. The need for such clarity is vital since we are asked to teach the Faith.

In current Baha'i culture teaching and proselytization can be blurry. For example, did you know that in contrast to what Mr. Dobbs says above, Baha'is have started to go from door to door?

That is, actually knocking on doors and starting to speak to people about the Baha'i Faith? They may not "teach" directly or in the same pushy style as Jehovah's Witnesses but they are going up to strangers with the intention of converting them to the Baha'i Faith.

So although the actual action is to invite you to participate in say, children's moral education classes organized by the local Baha'i community, or a devotional event, the intention is teaching. So is that then proselytizing?

In talking with Baha'is about this one person told me that for them proselytizing is when you force someone to change their religion. Or promise them some kind of reward. In other words, bribe them. Anything short of that is ok.

However this definition of proselytism is not correct. In actuality proselytism is "the practice of attempting to convert people to another opinion, usually another religion.

The word proselytism is derived ultimately from the Greek language prefix 'pros' (towards) and the verb 'erchomai' (I come). Historically in the *New Testament*, the word *proselyte* denoted a person who had converted to the Jewish religion. Though the word proselytism was originally tied to Christianity, it is also used to refer to other religions' attempts to convert people to their beliefs or even any attempt to convert people to another point of view, religious or not."

Clearly, by this definition, what Baha'is are doing is proselytizing, and any assertion to the contrary is really a semantic game, rather than a genuine distinction.

Of course, Baha'is are not the only ones trying to pin down this concept. According to Wikipedia, here are the differences between what some consider to be legitimate versus illegitimate proselytism:

- No attempt to convert others unless they specifically ask about one's religion
- Preaching
- Providing physical benefits in hopes that recipients will be open to listening
- Providing physical benefits only to those willing to listen

- Providing physical benefits only to proselytes
- Forcing people to become proselytes

What about you? What do you consider to be the the difference between these two? How can they be recognized? How are they defined?

If a friend starts up a conversation with another friend and it leads to religion and they end up talking about the Baha'i Faith is that teaching or proselytizing? What if instead of a friend it is a stranger? What if the Baha'i flat out says, "You know, you should become a Baha'i. Here's a card."

What if a Baha'i goes door to door in a neighborhood to invite people to a fireside? to a children's class? to some other Baha'i inspired and organized meeting or event? Is that proselytizing or teaching?

Where does one begin and the other end? Can you provide specific examples from your own experience or imagination?

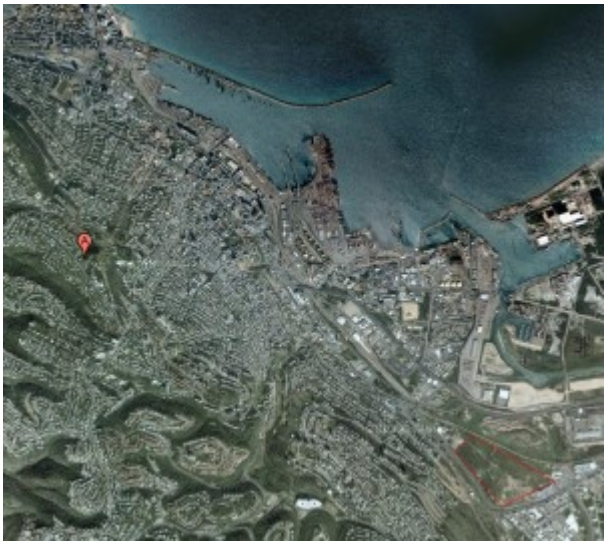
Disney Amusement Park Coming to Haifa

Disney World is coming to Haifa, Israel!

Well, sort of.

Walt Disney Company's investment arm Shamrock Holdings in partnership with the local privately owned firm, New Lineo Cinemas, will build a massive 30,000-square meter Disney amusement park as well as a 25 screen theatre complex and shopping plazas. The project is still in development stages but it is estimated to cost $170 million (600 million shekels) and to be completed by 2013.

The Disney amusement park will be located at a 20 acre empty plot of land adjoining other existing cinemas, but rather far from the Baha'i gardens and shrines (denoted by 'A' on the map):



Click to see larger image

The transition of Haifa from an industrial port city with heavy industries, factories and corrosively bad air quality is gaining pace with this project. Haifa is already famous within Israel for its diverse community of people who live in peaceful coexistence. Hopefully, the transformation will continue and the city will come to reflect economic diversity as well with less pollution causing service businesses like this.

One news report had this amusing quote:

> If things go as planned, Haifa's landmark sites such as the Bahai Temple or the Carmelite cable car could soon be replaced by Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and friends.

Perhaps this might be a good time to remind my dear fellow Baha'is that the point of pilgrimage is not and never has been to Haifa or the surrounding areas. So where is it then?

That, I'm happy to tell you, is "a little known fact".

Documentary "I Am" Explores The Unity & Interconnectedness of All

The documentary "I Am" is the surprising work of Hollywood director Tom Shadyac, better known for slapstick comedies. "I Am" is about his own personal journey and transformation from the typical Hollywood elite with a 7,000 square foot mansion to a gnawing feeling that there is more to life.

Shadyac's sense of humour still shines through as he doesn't take himself too seriously even when he is asking essential life questions.

The film starts off by asking, What is wrong with the world and what can we do to fix it? What is humankind's basic nature?

At times the film veers into new age pseudo-science like the Global Coherence Initiative or yogurt in a petri dish being affected by Shadyac's emotional state. But the main thesis is the interconnectedness of all things and the consequences that has for everything.

As a Baha'is the documentary was both maddeningly frustrating to watch and uplifting. Frustrating because the unity and oneness of manking, and therefore, its interconnectedness is self-evident to us through our theology and to see it require exposition seems a tad pedantic.

Uplifting because through efforts like this, it is evident that while there are many things wrong with the world, an ever advancing civilization is slowly becoming cognizant of this truth. While it may seem imperceptible at times, such an enlightenment is gaining momentum and will inevitably envelop every single human.

Watch the full documentary "I Am"

Egyptians Celebrate World Religion Day Early

Next Sunday, January 16th 2011, is the 3rd Sunday of January and that means that it will be celebrated worldwide as “World Religion Day” by Baha’i communities around the world.

The observance of WRD began in 1950 when a few weeks earlier in December 1949, the NSA of the Baha’is of the United States issued a simple proclamation:

> The National Spritiual Assembly has instituted an annual World Religion Day to be observed publicly by the Baha’i communities whenever possible throughout the United States.

So look for events in your local community.

But the Egyptians honored the spirit of World Religion Day a bit early this year.

The Coptic Orthodox Christian church and believers in Egypt have always had a very uneasy and difficult time in Egypt. They have suffered major discrimination and even violence on a regular basis. Last week on New Year’s Eve, they suffered an especially painful attack when a suicide bomber detonated at Saints Church in Alexandria and killed 21 people.

The Muslim community of Egypt responded to a call by prominent liberal minded Egyptian muslims such as Mohamed El-Sawy to rally in support of the beleaguered minority and hold candle light vigils around Coptic churches this Friday during their mass.

In this way, the Muslims proclaimed their solidarity with their Christian brethren and faced terrorism head on, declaring that the attack was not just against the Copts but on Egypt

itself. For more, see this article from ahram online.

Of course, as with all extremists, there is more than enough discrimination and violence to go around. The Baha'i community in Egypt has also been battling a very difficult problem for many years. The Baha'is are not only faced with the same discrimination but an even thornier issue.

This being that the Egyptian government would not issue proper government documents to Baha'is because it did not recognize the Baha'i Faith as a religion. This lead to a host of

complications for Egyptian Baha'is. There has been some slight shifts in the policy but it is far from resolved. For more details and to keep up with back story and developments, visit the Baha'i Faith in Egypt blog.

To give you an example of the type of froward attitudes faced by Baha'is in Egypt, here is a sample of several clips from Egyptian TV with English subtitles:

The first few minutes of the video features Abd Al-Fattah Al-Sheik, the former president of Al-Azhar. Yes, that Al-Azhar…

Election of Universal House of Justice 2013

A few days ago National Spiritual Assembly members from around the world gathered in Haifa at the 11th International Baha'i Convention to elect the members of the Universal House of Justice. The occassion also marked the 50th anniversary of the first election of the institution in 1963.

The new members of the Universal House of Justice are (in order of votes):

Paul Lample, Firaydoun Javaheri, Payman Mohajer, Gustavo Correa, Shahriar Razavi, Stephen Birkland, Stephen Hall, Chuungu Malitonga, and Ayman Rouhani.

The two vacancies made available due to the retirement of Dr. Farzam Arbab and Kiser Barnes were filled by Chuungu Malitonga and Ayman Rouhani. Not surprisingly, the new kids on the block were International Teaching Center Counsellors and they got the least votes. The other seven incumbents were easily re-elected as has been the trend since the creation of the institution.

See below for an updated historical membership infographic for the Universal House of Justice.

Chuungu Malitonga Previously Mr. Malitonga was a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of Zambia. He served on the NSA until November 2008 when he was appointed a Continental Counsellor and subsequently promoted on March 2010 to the ITC. He was appointed to the International Teaching Center (along with Praveen Mallik from India) to replace the vacancies created in that institution by the election of Stephan Birkland and Stephen Hall to the UHJ in the 2010 by-election.

Ayman Rouhani Previously Dr. Ayman Rouhani was a Continental Counsellor for Asia (since 2005). In 2008 he was appointed to the ITC along with eight other Bahai's – see full list below.

Due to several factors, the Universal House of Justice that we have today is one which we haven't seen before. It is both young and blindered.

I say a 'young' Universal House of Justice both in the sense of age as well as in the degree of seniority in membership. The member with the most seniority is Javaheri with 10 years (having been elected in 2003). In aggregate, the current membership of the Universal House of Justice has been in that post for only 3.4 years.

Compare this incarnation to the 1983 one. Back then the membership of the Universal House of Justice was not only much older in age but they also had on average been members of the institution for 17.9 years.

And I say blindered because they are an extremely homogeneous bunch. The nine men are the second iteration ITC members. That is to say, the nine members were appointed by a Universal House of Justice which (for the most part) itself was comprised of members who were themselves appointed to the ITC. The trend began in 1987 with Peter Khan and has only accelerated since.

To those fellow Baha'is new to this realization allow me to explain. The appointment of male Counsellors to the International Teaching Center has come to act as a de facto nomination. Since Baha'is elections are devoid of campaigning or official nominations, such tacit nudges have an asymmetrical effect. As a result, the highest institution of the Baha'i Faith is now populated by a tiny subset rather than being drawn from the wider population. Whereas before they were elected from the large membership pool comprised of the worldwide National Assembly members, it is now exclusively drawn from the ITC. When these individuals are elected to the UHJ, they in turn appoint a fresh batch of nominees for the next round in 5 years time. And we go around in a closed loop once more.

To see this closed loop take shape before our eyes we need not look further than the other two newest members of the UHJ: Stephan Birkland and Stephen Hall who were elected in a by-election in 2010 when two other members retired.

It was only 5 years ago, in 2008, that a new batch of ITC members were appointed by the UHJ: Uransaikhan Baatar, Stephen Birkland, Stephen Hall, Joan Lincoln, Juan Francisco Mora, Rachel Ndegwa, Zenaida Ramirez, Ayman Rouhani, and Penelope Walker. To fellow Baha'is who have not awakened to this phenomena this is not the only shocking element. It is the speed of this process that one marvels at.

Of the nine, four were men (and therefore eligible for membership to the UHJ) and five were women (ineligible for membership to the UHJ). Of the four eligible, only Juan Francisco Mora has not been elected.

And that isn't due to any fault of Juan's. There has simply not been an opportunity for a third member to be elected! But he's an obvious choice for the next opening and would perhaps had beaten out his peers had he combed some talcum powder into that youthful and thick crop of hair.

The consequence is a self-reinforcing process which is only gaining speed. Only those who have bought in to the Ruhi program and are ready to double-down have a prayer of being appointed/nominated. Anyone else who does not share this viewpoint is marginalized. This is the essence of the group-think strangling the current Baha'i Administration.

The sad part of all this is that the current structure of the Baha'i Administrative order in no way resembles that which was laid down by Abdu'l-Baha. Instead of twin, parallel but distinct institutions at the top we have a melding of the two under the aegis of the Universal House of Justice.

What are your thoughts on this? I'm eager to hear the views of others, especially if they differ from mine.

Below you will find the updated historical membership infographic for the Universal House of Justice. Click on the square button on the bottom right hand corner to see a full screen version of the infographic:

Emergence From Obscurity: The Bachelor

bevin-bachelor-bahai.pngWe've been told much about an eventual "emergence from obscurity" for the Baha'i Faith. Look no further! It has happened.

The American TV show "*The Bachelor*" where 25 bachellorettes vie for the love of one lucky bachelor has a unique contestant: Bevin from California is a Baha'i.

We find out because as a finalist she accompanies Andy (the bachelor) to his family home and there his father asks Bevin about her religion.

I'm pretty sure this is the "emergence from obscurity" that we've been told so much about.

You can read the messageboard discussions on Bevin's religion here and here.

Since the show has already been taped, Andy has already made his choice. Was it Bevin? Since there is only one other bachellorette there's a 50-50 chance.

Stay tuned and find out!

Explaining Incumbency in Baha'i Elections

Alison was kind enough to rummage through the archives of Talisman and forward me a brilliant post from more than 10 years ago which explains the incumbency inherent in Baha'i elections. I've changed a few things here and there but for the most part, I can not take credit for what follows. I wish to share it with you because it is a clear and lucid explanation of what is going on within our communities:

*** *** ***

The following presents a specific hypothetical scenario to illustrate how incumbency can not only occur but be the default within Baha'i elections.

First the assumptions:

1. No spoilt ballots/votes – in other words, all votes and ballots are accepted and correct
2. Each voter uses 3 of their votes on existing Assembly members
3. Among the Assembly members there is no clear voter preference, that is to say, the voter randomly uses 3 votes on any 3 current Assembly members
4. The remaining 6 votes are randomly cast for non-Assembly members

In our scenario there are 100 community members, 100 ballots and 900 total votes. Of these, following the assumptions above, 300 go towards incumbents and the remaining 600 to non-incumbents.

The catch comes when we realize that those 300 votes have been randomly distributed within 9 people, while the 600 votes were distributed within 91 people.

- Average # Votes for Incumbent: 300 ?$\div$ 9 = 33.3
- Average # Votes for Non-Incumbent: 600 ?$\div$ 91 = 6.6

With these types of odds its quite clear that the Assembly will most likely remain the same unless:

- Voters are adverse to particular Assembly members
- Voters are extremly keen on one non-incumbent

Paradoxically, the problem gets worse the larger the community is and much less in smaller communities. The key is the ratio of the non-incumbents to the ratio of incumbents. Where the LSA members are a significant share of the community (small localities) the ratio is much more even than in larger communities.

For example, in a 20 member community, holding all above assumptions the same, we have a total of 180 votes:

- Avg. Votes per Incumbent: 60 ?$\div$ 9 = 6.7
- Avg. Votes per non-Incumbent: 120 ?$\div$ 11 = 10.9

Interestingly enough, in the small community, with the same parameters there is actually an *anti-incumbency* bias.

However if we extend the size of the community to say 1000, under our stated assumptions, incumbency is virtually guaranteed. We would have 3000 votes distributed among 9 people and the remaining 6000 within the other 991.

Anecdotal evidence of the Assembly voting dynamic is that almost everyone who is eligible to receive votes, does. Most everyone expends 3-4 votes on existing LSA members, however there is rarely a strong preference for one LSA member over another. This type of voting behaviour is similar to that implied by the above assumptions.

So how can we address the inherent incumbency bias within medium and large Baha'i communities? What adjustments and changes can we make to the Baha'i election process?

By the way, before I go further, let me address what some Baha'is fallaciously believe: that no changes, whatsoever, can be made to Baha'i elections. Shoghi Effendi and Abdu'l-Baha outlined principles and elements of Baha'i Administration. They did not create a straight-jacket. In fact, they both left things to be determined and tweaked in the fullness of time.

Just because "we don't do things that way" doesn't mean that we can't. Change is tough. We all hate change. But guess what? That's what life is all about.

So please, be aware that the changes and ideas that I am suggesting are in keeping with the principles of the Faith. Whether they are ultimately implemented or not is up to the House of Justice as the administrative and legislative authority within the Faith. But there is no question that such adaptations are necessary and vital.

Especially when we can see clear signs that the current situation is causing stagnation, ossification and group think, dragging the community down.

(to be continued)

Fahrenheit 145

Here is the latest letter of the Universal House of Justice – via the Secretariat – to the National Spritual Assemblies of the World (if you nod off, try to wake up by the last two paragraphs):

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT
Baha'is World Centre . P.O. Box 155 . 31 001 Haifa, Israel
Tel: 972 (4) 835 8358 . Fax: 972 (4) 835 8280 . Email: secretariat@bwc.org

14 November 2005

Transmitted by email

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Baha'is Friends,

Recently, questions have arisen which have prompted the Universal House of Justice to comment further on matters treated in the compilation “Issues Related to the Study of the Baha'is Faith”.

The Baha'is principle calling for investigation of reality encourages an unfettered search for knowledge and truth by whoever wishes to engage in it. When applied to the Revelation of Bah??’u’ll??h, it inevitably gives rise to a wide range of responses. Some, attracted to the Message, embrace the Cause as their own. Some may respond positively to certain precepts or principles and willingly collaborate toward shared aims. Some may find it to be an interesting social phenomenon worthy of study. Still others, content with their own beliefs, may reject its claims. Baha'iss are taught to be respectful of the views of others, believing that conscience should not be coerced.

Upon becoming a Baha'is, one accepts certain fundamental beliefs; but invariably one’s knowledge of the Teachings is limited and often mixed with personal ideas. Shoghi Effendi explains that “an exact and thorough comprehension of so vast a system, so sublime a revelation, so sacred a trust, is for obvious reasons beyond the reach and ken of our finite minds.” Over time, through study, prayerful reflection, and an effort to live a Baha'is life, immature ideas yield to a more profound understanding of Bah??’u’ll??h’s Revelation. Service to the Cause plays a particular role in the process, for the meaning of the Text is clarified as one translates insights into effective action. As a matter of principle, individual understanding or interpretation should not be suppressed, but valued for whatever contribution it can make to the discourse of the Baha'is community. Nor should it, through dogmatic insistence of the individual, be allowed to bring about disputes and arguments

among the friends; personal opinion must always be distinguished from the explicit Text and its authoritative interpretation by ‘Abdu’l-Bah?? and Shoghi Effendi and from the elucidations of the Universal House of Justice on “problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not
expressly recorded in the Book”.

In searching for understanding, Baha'iss naturally acquaint themselves with published materials from a variety of sources. A book written by a disinterested non-Baha'is scholar about the Faith, even if it reflects certain assumptions and puts forward conclusions acceptable within a given discipline but which are at variance with Baha'is belief, poses no particular problem for Baha'iss, who would regard these perceptions as an honest attempt to explore a religious phenomenon as yet little understood generally. Any non-biased effort to make the Faith comprehensible to a thoughtful readership, however inadequate it might appear, would evoke genuine Baha'is appreciation for the perspective offered and research skill invested in the project. The matter is wholly different, however, when someone intentionally attacks the Faith.

An inescapable duty devolves upon the friends so to situate themselves in the knowledge of the Teachings as to be able to respond appropriately to such a challenge as it arises and thus uphold the integrity of the Faith. The words of Bah??’u’ll??h Himself shed light on the proper attitude to adopt. He warns the believers “not to view with too critical an eye the sayings and writings of men”. “Let them”, He instructs, “rather approach such sayings and writings in a spirit of open-mindedness and loving sympathy. Those men, however, who, in this may, have been led to assail, in their inflammatory writings, the tenets of the Cause of God, are to be treated differently. It is incumbent upon all men, each according to his ability, to refute the arguments of those that have attacked the Faith of God.”

A different type of challenge arises when an individual or group, using the privilege of Baha'is membership, adopts various means to impose personal views or an ideological agenda on the Baha'is community. In one recent instance, for example, an individual has declared himself a “Baha'is theologian, writing from and for a religious community,” whose aim is “to criticize, clarify, purify and strengthen the ideas of the Baha'is community, to enable Baha'iss to understand their relatively new Faith and to see what it can offer the world”. Assertions of this kind go far beyond expressions of personal opinion, which any Baha'is is free to voice. As illustrated, here is a claim that lies well outside the

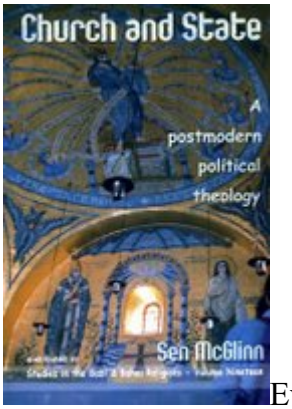
framework of Baha'is belief and practice. Bah??'u'll??h has liberated human minds by prohibiting within His Faith any caste with ecclesiastical prerogatives that seeks to foist a self-assumed authority upon the thought and behavior of the mass of believers. Indeed, He has prescribed a system that combines democratic practices with the application of knowledge through consultative processes.

The House of Justice is confident that the principles herein presented will enable the friends to benefit from diverse contributions resulting from exploration of the manifold implications of Bah??'u'll??h's vast Revelation, while remaining impervious to the efforts of those few who, whether in an explicit or veiled manner, attempt to divert the Baha'is community from essential understandings of the Faith.

With loving Baha'is greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

****



Eventhough the letter doesn't explicitly say who the quoted author is, there is only one recently published work which qualifies: *Church and State: A Postmodern Political Theology* by Sen McGlinn (previously mentioned in here).

Now, I've got a crazy idea! Let's turn to the author's own words to see if we can understand better what is going on here. Maybe the context or the full sentences used may yield some further enlightenment. I know, I know, you're nervous. After all, shouldn't we just go with the quote snippets provided in the UHJ's letter? why would we need to do any more reading? reading is hard! why not just take the letter at face value and go and make some guacamole and kick back? Somehow, I think you will find the courage to postpone guacamole time when you remind yourself what Baha'u'llah said about justice:

> O Son of Spirit! The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behoveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.
>
> Baha'u'llah, *The Hidden Words of Bah??'u'll??h*

Are you ready? Here is the full and unadulterated text from McGlinn:

> This book presents my own understanding of the Bahai teachings on some issues that are now critically important to the Bahai community and its relations with the world. My approach has been enriched by my Christian background and education, my studies of theology and church history at Knox Theological Hall and Holy Cross Seminary in Dunedin, New Zealand, and studies of Persian and Islamic Studies at Leiden University, in the Netherlands.
>
> I should declare at the outset that my stance is not that of a historian or academic scholar of the science of religion, but of a Bahai theologian, writing from and for a religious community, and I speak as if the reader shares the concerns of that community. As a Bahai theologian, I seek to criticize, clarify, purify and strengthen the ideas of the Bahai community, to enable Bahais to understand their relatively new faith and to see what it can offer the world. The approach is not value-free. I would be delighted if the Bahai Faith proved to have a synergy with post-modernity, if it prospered in the coming decades and had an influence on the world. The reader who is used to academic studies of religion that avoid such value judgements will have to make the necessary adjustments here and there. I do not however write as an apologist: the goal is a serious study that can aid the Bahai community and others to discover the potential for contemporary religious life which lies within the Bahai scriptures, rather than simply to repackage the Bahai Faith in a palatable form for present needs.
>
> from foreword of *Church and State*

Hmmm. Now, lets see. I don't know about you but I need a dictionary to know exactly what theology (or a theologian) is all about – especially since the author uses it twice in the above paragraph, as well as in the secondary title of the book.

> Main Entry: the·ol·o·gy
> Pronunciation: thE-'?&#65533;-l&-jE
> Function: noun
> Inflected Form(s): plural -gies
> Etymology: Middle English theologie, from Latin theologia, from Greek, from the- + -logia -logy
> 1 : the study of religious faith, practice, and experience; especially : the study of God and of God's relation to the world

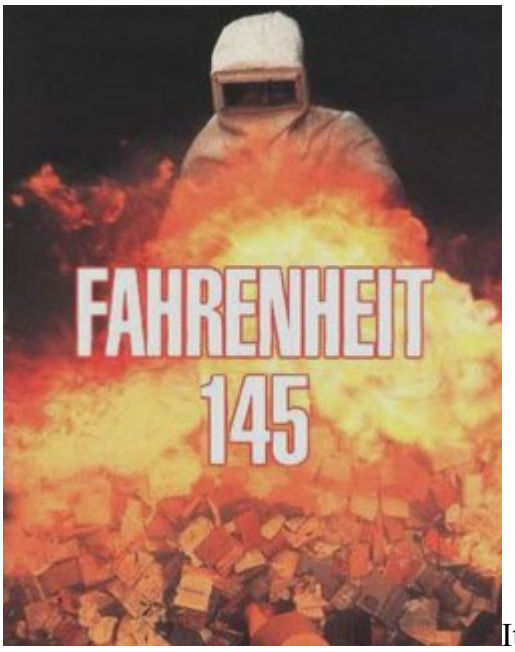
Alright. Assuming that's a correct definition, a theologian would be someone who studies or practices theology. And so basically the author is stating that he is a Baha'i *theologian*, someone who is dedicated to "the study of religious faith, practice and experience…". I don't see anything out of sorts there. Anyone who studies the Baha'i Faith can make the same assertion and they would be correct. Albeit within polite Baha'i circles you are more apt to hear the phrase *Baha'i scholar* but Baha'i theologian isn't incorrect. Apart from that, in the foreword section quoted above, the author seems to be taking great pains to set out clearly his bias and perspective on the subject. He furthermore sets out his intentions and goals in creating the work the reader is about to explore. This is rather admirable because it at least shows an acknowledgment of bias and an honest admission of partiality.

Nowhere does the author make any claims of status, station or rank. He rather simply clarifies what his shortcomings are and what his end purpose is. This is rather interesting when it is contrasted to what the Secretariat claims he is doing – asserting an ecclesiastical rank or station.

I apologize beforehand but I'm not good with big words so I had to crack open my dictionary again. It tells me that "ecclesiastic" pertains to the institution of clergy… a cleric in other words. Not once does the author use the word *ecclesiastical* nor make any allusions to it. It is in fact the Secretariat which introduces this loaded word and promptly places it in McGlinn's mouth. The Secretariat is building a strawman argument (and taking great relish in knocking it down).

Of course, everything the Secretariat says regarding the absence of clergy within the Baha'i Faith is true. But it is also true that McGlinn never makes such a claim nor even alludes to "foisting a self-assumed authority upon the thought and behavior of the mass of believers." In fact, one could very well argue that it is the Secretariat that is engaging in such behavior since this letter is such a strongly worded smear of a scholar's work that it will probably result in less Baha'is reading it. Just a hunch, but I'm guessing that we won't see any study circles devoted to *Church and State* anytime soon.

Either the Secretariat lacks a common household dictionary (and the requisite intelligence to use it) or they have misinterpreted McGlinn's words with malicious intent. I'm not really sure which it is but it doesn't really matter because as you'll agree, either is as bad as the other.



Its also interesting that the Secretariat sees itself as a gatekeeper obligated to tell Baha'is what is and what isn't "essential understanding of the Faith". According to Baha'i scriptures this is outside of the purview of the UHJ and the Secretariat. In any case, aren't Baha'is entrusted with this responsibility themselves? Shouldn't they themselves decide what is and what isn't "essential"?

It never ceases to impress me that with all the workload the House of Justice has, they somehow (miraculously?) find the time to do book reviews. Something like the ongoing abuse of a young Baha'i girl at the hands of her father (who is an NSA member and chairperson) can be left unaddressed for four years – until there is risk of public exposure and humiliation – but a book that dares question or illuminate must be pounced upon

posthaste. One day I'd like to risk madness and take a peek behind the curtain at the logic which creates such lopsided priorities.

And would it be cynical for me to point out that whenever the House of Justice lobs a bombshell it is outsourced to the Secretariat? What is the Secretariat anyway? (apart from a horse who could run really really fast) Isn't it simply the mouthpiece of the House? Can the Secretariat distribute any letters without the approval of the House? Is it an independent organ? Yes, no and no. And if you recall, it was also used to lob the "spiritually corrosive" letter which explicitly identified four people and labeled them as such. Until then I had no idea that the Secretariat was able to peek into the very souls of men and judge their spiritual worth. Live and learn, I suppose. In the end, the use of the Secretariat makes it very convenient for the House of Justice and its defenders to disavow any responsibility by pointing out that it wasn't them but rather the wayward Secretariat writing the letter in question. I'll leave it to you to decide if this defense is adequate.

Now if you're really feeling naughty you may wish to take a peek at another recently published book: *The Baha'i Faith in America* by William Garlington. I can't wait to read the jeremiad from the Secretariat about it.

Related Links:

Check out Karen's post on the October 14th 2005 letter.

Fahrenheit 445

Well, Baha'i Rants' prediction that the boycott of Kalimat would not be restricted to the US, where it began, is slowly becoming true:

> In fact, I would not at all be surprised to see other NSAs soon following the lead of the US in this decision. In that case, it would confirm my suspicions that it did originate from the House of Justice (and/or the ITC).

Just recently the UK NSA boycotted Kalimat. Not only does this mean that Kalimat is in further danger of closing, but more and more it also seems that this is not an isolated action

taken by the NSA of the US. Rather, it was probably a decision taken at the highest level (ITC/UHJ) and delegated down to them:

Below you will find the latest letter from the UK NSA to all local assemblies in their jurisdiction. To make it interesting, the UK letter (in blue) invoking a boycott of Kalimat is contrasted in color with the US NSA letter (in red) :

23 July 2006

December 29, 2005

Dearly loved Friends

Dear Baha'is Friends,

The National Spiritual Assembly has taken the decision that Baha'i Books UK and its agents will **cease to distribute books and other items marketed by** Kalimat Press with immediate effect.

Enclosed for your information is a copy of our letter of today's date addressed to Kalim??t Press. We ask you to comply with the decision we have made that all national and local Baha'is agencies **cease to distribute books and other items marketed by** this publisher. However, **you may continue to sell whatever you may have in stock until your inventories are depleted**. **Individuals are free**, of course, to decide to purchase books from any publisher.

Baha'i Books UK and its agents **may continue, however, to sell whatever Kalimat titles remain in stock until their inventories are depleted**. Further, **individuals are free** to decide to purchase books from other suppliers.

Our decision was regretfully **reached as a result of increasing concern in recent years that a number of titles handled by Kalim??t Press, aside from those which have enriched Baha'is literature over the years, contain matter inimical to the best interests of our Faith**. It is highly **inappropriate** for Baha'is institutions, which are obligated to **safeguard such interests, to provide channels of distribution for** publishers promoting such titles.

The National Assembly's decision was **reached as a result of increasing concern in recent years that a number of titles published by Kalimat Press, aside from those which have enriched Baha'i literature over the years, contain matter inimical to the best interests of the Faith**. The National Assembly believes that it would therefore be **inappropriate** for it, as the institution obligated to **safeguard such interests in the United Kingdom, to provide channels of distribution for** such material.

With loving Baha'i greetings,

With loving Baha'is greetings,

National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United Kingdom

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF THE BAH??'??S OF THE UNITED STATES

As you've noticed, the two letters are almost identical. Were they simply polished and lightly edited based off a "master' letter out of the ITC?

You make the call.

Related Links:

Karen's commentary on her blog

Alison's commentary and podcast on her blog

Boycott of Kalimat

Fahrenheit 245

Website of Kalimat Press

NSA letter to LSAs (pdf file)

NSA letter to Kalimat Press (pdf file)

Farewell To Iran

Here is the story of the bittersweet goodbyes of Iranian Baha'is leaving Iran by train, travelling through Turkey to escape the stifling and oppressive Islamic regime.

Every Thursday at dusk, members of one of Iran's most beleaguered religious minorities gather at Tehran's railway station. With anxious, teary eyes, they are there to see off relatives and fellow Baha'is who have decided to pull up stakes forever and take the 8 p.m. train to a new life in Turkey and beyond.

Click on any picture to launch gallery view (then click right/left edge for next/previous):

One of the travelers says:

> For the next five or six months I kept trying to talk her out of it, but in the end it was I who gave up, because I realized she was right in coming to this decision. But believe me, even now all my heart and soul belongs to Iran.

While I do not mean to diminish the sadness that is understandable for anyone who leaves their homeland, family and friends behind, I find such extreme sentiments a little bit surprising from a fellow Baha'i.

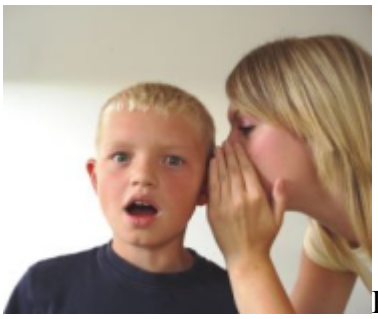
After all, didn't Baha'u'llah say:

> Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind.

From the account of Professor Edward G. Browne, of the University of Cambridge.

With thanks to Sen McGlinn for the article.

Financial Scandal Rocks Italian Baha'i Community



Recently the small Italian Baha'i community was shocked to learn that one of its most prominent, long-serving and active members, the former General Secretary of the NSA: Franco Ceccherini, had been ousted from the NSA and formally charged for embezzlement and fraud in the amount of 360,000 Euros.

Ceccherini allegedly stole the money over the lengthy period of time that he served at the highest levels of the Baha'i community in Italy. It appears that he embezzled funds from 1992 until 2006 by fraudulently producing invoices, letters and documents and then pocketing the funds he received for them. Throughout the more than 14 years that Ceccherini served in the institutions, he alternated between high level positions: sometimes he served as the General Secretary of the NSA of Italy, while other times he served as the Head of the Office of the Secretariat – which included several other individuals employed by the NSA. And at times Ceccherini served as *both* General Secretary and as Head of the Office of the Secretariat.

Through the uninterrupted access granted to him by these positions, Ceccherini was able to allegedly perpetrate this scheme for almost 15 years. It is still a mystery how the Treasurer could not detect such a large and prolonged fraud. Nor is it known what, if any, control

measures were circumvented by

Ceccherini. As it stands now, neither the Treasurer, any of the other NSA members nor any employees of the NSA have been charged.

The scheme began to unravelled when the Italian equivalent of the IRS contacted the NSA of Italy and filed a charge of tax evasion against it. Through the ensuing audit and investigations it came to light that all these years Ceccherini had been pocketing the funds that should have been going to the INPS and the INAIL (state pension and worker's compensation/insurance plans).

My suspicion is that since most continental European Baha'i communities (France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, etc.) do not have the privilege of incorporation enjoyed elsewhere, the actual banking was in the name of an individual. And my guess is that individual was Ceccherini; because of his tenure within the Baha'i community or simply because he was trusted. After all, when you are unincorporated, you must trust an individual to administer the finances in their name. There is no other option. If my suspicions are correct it explains why the Treasurer or other person were not caught up in the fraud and how one person alone could perpetrate it.

Consequences of this tragedy are many. For one, the NSA of Italy has been thrown into total chaos. It has had to deal with an extensive internal investigation and financial audit. Theis is a serious financial blow to the community as funds which should have been paid to the government for more than a decade now need to be paid in lump sum. Thankfully the government has agreed that the NSA as an institution was not perpetrating the fraud and agreed to dismiss 90,000 Euros in interest and fines they

had levied. Which means that the NSA has to pay back 275,000 Euros. The House of Justice has loaned the Italian NSA 200,000 Euros to buffer the blow to their annual budget. This loan will have to be repaid to the House in installments over time but the NSA will still have to make a lump sum payment of 75,000 Euros. A significant chunk of change for a community the size of Italy.

Other consequences are more intangible. The spouse of Ceccherini, also a prominent Baha'i was removed from her position as an Auxiliary Board Member (Propagation). The news has left the Italian community shell-shocked since Ceccherini was seen as a pillar of the community. On top of this, several projects such as the office of public information have had to be closed or curtailled sharply due to lack of funds.

No matter how extensively one creates control measures, nor how draconian in nature, they can be circumvented by another person. Ultimately, nothing short of personal transformation can prevent such criminal acts. As Baha'u'llah says in the Hidden Words:

> "Busy not thyself with this world, for with fire We test the gold and with gold We test Our servants."

But this does not mean that there aren't lessons to be learned from such a sad state of affairs. Nor that common sense should not be used. What we have in the institutions of the Baha'i Faith basically relies on the good character of those within it. If they falter, then there are no measures to protect the community. This has to change.

We have no transparency, no control measures, no accountability and no term limits. Combine these and you have a potentially explosive situation. Add the spark of human shortcoming and you have a bomb that can devastate whole communities and lay waste to decades of painstaking growth and development.

TRANSPARENCY

The Baha'i community has gradients of financial transparency. At the local level, things are quite clear with regular reports by the local treasurer and detailed reports of budgets and

expenses. At the national level, things get decidedly more murky. Less detail is divulged: only income and expenses are shared (not assets and liabilities) , while the delegates to the national convention are the only ones who get to see and look at the full accounts – but they can't share them with their communities and they have a very tight schedule with limited time to look over them. At the international level, the picture gets pitch dark with absolutely no information divulged except for the estimates of large scale projects (recent examples are for the Arc and the Chile temple). Beyond that, trying to pry financial information at this level is like trying to shuck an oyster with jello.

Financial reporting is most detailed and most transparent at the local level, where ironically the least amount of money is involved. The Italian incident involving 360,000 Euros may seem like a lot of money but it is a rounding error in international budgets. This culture of opacity and secrecy is fertile ground for the nastier attributes of human nature and must be blotted out from the Baha'i community.

CONTROL MEASURES

If due to an inability to incorporate, the affairs of a whole community have to be placed in the hands of a person, a simple control measure is to open a shared or joint account. This way two people must be aware of and make authorization for any transactions. Second, I for one am still not convinced how the Italian national treasurer can not be atleast found to be culpable of gross negligence in this case. Pleading ignorance is no defense for them. If anything they should be fully investigated and asked to resign, if for nothing more than their incompetence in recognizing and preventing such a long lived scheme. Similarly simple and easy control measures are left unimplemented in Baha'i instititutions. Blame incompetence, ignorance or a childish innocence. Whatever the reason, it is plain stupid to not have them.

ACCOUNTABILITY

My fellow Baha'is usually bristle at that word since we believe that the institutions are not to be held accountable to their community. But this only extends to decisions. I'm speaking of management. An NSA should be held accountable to its community for mis-management, as this case clearly illustrates. If you are incompetent, you have to answer to the community. Period. The principle of non-accountability is not a free pass for negligence and idiocy.

TERM LIMITS

This is a much broader concept than I can do justice to here but put plainly it means that individuals have a limit to the number of years they serve in Baha'i institutions. In almost all Baha'i communities, large and small, we find that a small group of individuals dominate the elected and appointed institutions year in and year out. This has sadly become the norm. The consequence is that these individuals start to create little fiefdoms and get quite comfortable. Even getting a sense of entitlement. Can anyone doubt that Franco Ciccherini could have perpetrated such a massive (both in length and in quantity) fraud had we had term limits which limited his access to the highest levels of administration? There are many, many other benefits to term limits beyond the prevention of fraud and crime within the administration. I will explore this topic in more detail at a later time and hope to do justice to it.

It is my hope that the Baha'i community in Italy will learn from this tragedy, rebuild, move on and continue to grow. And that Baha'is elsewhere will use this opportunity to avoid similar painful learning experiences by beginning to consult on how to increase transparency and accountability with the institutions; how to implement common sense control measures and how term limits can benefit the community.

Finding Hidden Purposes in Obedience

Here is an interesting post made by fellow Baha'i blogger, Neghan. For some reason he decided to erase his writing after publishing it on the web.

Similar to the previous occasion where a fellow blogger decided to self-censor themselves, I've plucked the content from Google Cache and present it here for your reading pleasure. I'm not sure why Neghan decided to remove this because to me it doesn't cross any lines, nor does it reveal anything which others have not already expressed.

Of particular interest is this excerpt:

> Until we realize that what worked in 1950's and 1960's Latin American countries, in homogeneous and often poorly educated communities with a completely different concept of time and with very different learning styles is not the best solution for bringing in the masses everywhere (especially in the

> West). Mix in the overzealous (bordering on fundamentalist) zeal encouraged in the training programs that appears to clash with much of Baha'i culture and alienates many of the existing Baha'is and you've got a real mess. I'm not sure how long it may take for the issues here to be realized, but we as Baha'is should be supportive and let things play out as they will. Perhaps one day we will be open to ideas about adapting content and delivery to different audiences, having a more customer-centered approach in our community relations, and more effectively and strategically using technology, messaging, and marketing tools to communicate, train, and empower believers to change the world.

You need not look far for my own take on Ruhi.

So it is published again in the interest of sharing and encouraging dialogue (with minimal changes to correct spelling & grammar). I hope that Neghan does not take offense since none is intended.

Enjoy

[START DOCUMENT]

Finding Hidden Purpose in Obedience
November 5, 2007 on 12:56 pm | In Community Life | No Comments

Finding Hidden Purposes in Obedience

It has been a while since I posted anything so here is something extra spicy for you all to chew on.

I read an article in the latest issue of the American Baha'i newspaper and it got me to thinking. In the article, written by the eminent John Hatcher, we are reminded that receiving mandates from the Universal House of Justice is essentially as if we are receiving mandates from God. Therefore, the article tells us essentially to do our Ruhi study classes, and whatever else the House asks of us, in a spirit of loving obedience. I really liked the article; I just have a bit of a twisted spin on it. Let me explain.

God works in mysterious ways — we mortals have a bad track record in figuring out His methods

If we look at religious history, and we look at those who were divinely guided and the choices they had to make, we see that infallibility is often not understood by the people of the time. Think about Abraham who was told to sacrifice His son. Abraham did not understand why He was being asked to do this. Clearly, infanticide was not going to be good for growth in the community. But this was a task that God asked Him to do, so He was willing to do it, and this taught us all a lesson about true obedience. Think about Noah who was told to sacrifice everything and get branded a fool by his people to build an ark. Think about how then he was promised by God when the Flood would arrive. The day came and the flood didn't happen. Did Noah freak out and abandon God? No, he kept his faith and admitted that He did not understand. Sometimes the reasons for certain decisions won't become clear until 5, 10, 50, or 100 years from now. Sometimes certain infallible decisions of divinely guided people (and today Institutions) may not lead to the results we expect in the way we want. In fact, sometimes those results may even be the opposite of what we expect, but they may have some bigger lesson to teach us in the process that turns out to be critical to achieving the ultimate ends we desire.

Example from the Old World

Let me give you an example. Beware, I'm now going to go into some politics here on the DailyBaha'i blog. This is just my individual interpretation of events going on in the world around us and it is no reflection on any kind of official Baha'i interpretation of events. These are just my musings. Here goes: I understand that the Lesser Peace (the political peace of the world where nations essentially band together to outlaw war) is prophesied to happen in the "near' future. I also understand that America is prophesied to lead the world to this new reality. For that to happen, America needs to realize that it is incapable of running the world with bullying tactics and of always getting its way with brute force. For this realization to happen, certain groups in America who have visions of American Global Dominance (or Pax Americana) which is a vision of our country being ordained (by God or something) to rule over the world as a benevolent master, need to be discredited. These ultra nationalists have at last had their chance to run the affairs of this country the way they have always wanted. They have had their cowboy president who uses force first and asks questions later. These America-First folks may not ever change their views themselves, but their views have been largely discredited in this country. Now that they have been discredited, they will have less influence and be less of a hindrance in the path to the Lesser Peace. Had they not been discredited, they may have used their powerful lobbying

organizations, thinktanks, and media outlets to block any attempts to create a Peaceful New World Order. And yes, I know how it makes them go into a wild frenzy when I use that last term…New World Order.

Ruhi as a Cleansing Force

This brings us back to the Baha'i Faith. Perhaps the current initiatives will play out as we hope, and study circles will lead to "A' clusters which will lead to intensive programs of growth which will lead to entry by troops and on and on. Or, perhaps the current initiatives will not work out the way we believe they will? Perhaps we have some key lessons to learn yet as a community? Perhaps the current process will, as some suspect, lead to great tests for believers who have any kind of relevant experience and who may see this massive endeavor as flawed if it expects to immediately increase the ranks of the believers. In fact, some even think it might lead to less active and less enthusiastic Baha'is, in the West in particular. But perhaps this needs to happen? Perhaps Ruhi is a cleansing of the ranks of the Baha'is of those who are not willing to suck up their ego and do things their experience and intellect tells them will not work? What greater test than this could a professional with years of experience and insight have?

Perhaps building the Ark is more about clearing the forest then building a ship

Perhaps Ruhi is a cleansing force sent to clear out our communities and institutions of past initiatives and efforts? If this is true, then I see three possible effects of this process.

(1.) A certain well-meaning "school of thought' about how to bring in the masses that is the driving force behind the Ruhi training program will need to be exhausted. Unfortunately, I fear that until these ideas have been tried and tried again, without achieving the desired results, we won't be able to change the way we do things. I'm not trying to sound cynical here, but I feel that we are putting too much emphasis on past experiences that occurred in very different circumstances and not learning from what is available in today's world. Therefore we need to support these efforts so that we can learn to break from the past and get to the next level. Until we realize that what worked in 1950's and 1960's Latin American countries, in homogeneous and often poorly educated communities with a completely different concept of time and with very different learning styles is not the best solution for bringing in the masses everywhere (especially in the West). Mix in the overzealous (bordering on fundamentalist) zeal encouraged in the training programs that

appears to clash with much of Baha'i culture and alienates many of the existing Baha'is and you've got a real mess. I'm not sure how long it may take for the issues here to be realized, but we as Baha'is should be supportive and let things play out as they will. Perhaps one day we will be open to ideas about adapting content and delivery to different audiences, having a more customer-centered approach in our community relations, and more effectively and strategically using technology, messaging, and marketing tools to communicate, train, and empower believers to change the world.

(2.) The second effect may be that our communities are being cleansed of all the old institutions (such as National Teaching Committee in the United States which was recently disbanded), so that we can focus more on Ruhi classes and the Institute Process. This cleansing is wiping away all the old ways of doing things and opening the way for new solutions in the future. We may continue to gut programs and offices that do not appear to help "the focus' until all that is left is a bare bones operation. At that point we may be ready for creative, dramatic, and critical changes to the way we do things that can then get this show on the road and start effective and sustainable growth.

(3.) Finally, those of us with logic- and evidence-based educational backgrounds, real-world organization building experience, open-minded and creative approaches to spiritual development, and individualistic thinking tendencies will continue to be severely tested by the current Plans of our communities. Those of us who cannot learn to be obedient when every fiber of our experience tells us that this won't work and may actually be accomplishing the opposite effects in the community (in the near term), will likely flush ourselves into inactivity, or even out of the community. But those of us who can see the bigger picture and humble ourselves and admit that there may be things going on that we just don't understand at this time may find that our obedience muscles stronger than ever and ready for any new tests that life will throw at us. This may in turn create a smaller but more effective core of believers ready to implement the dramatic and powerful campaigns that may be introduced in the future.

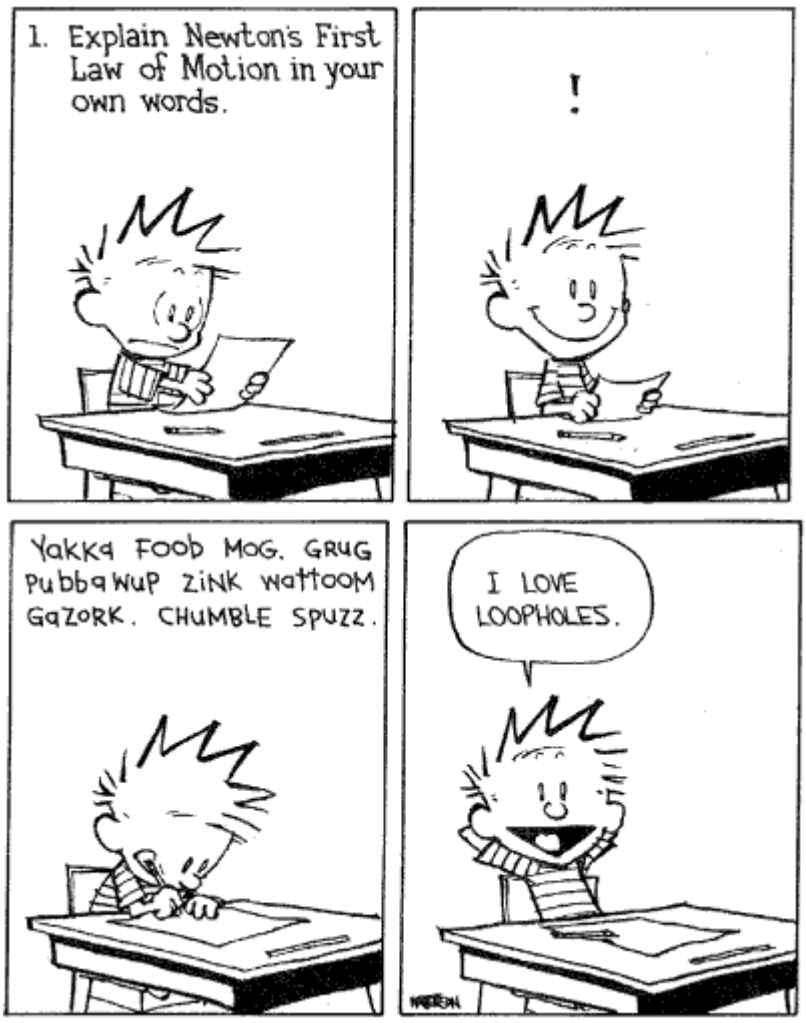
The Whirlwind Doesn't Have to Explain Itself to Little Old Me

This is just one scenario. I don't know what will happen. Perhaps I am wrong and things will not play out like this? I hope I am wrong, because the scenario painted above is rather grim. I have no crystal ball. All I know is that I love the Baha'i Faith and that I don't understand God's methods. There are many times that I, perhaps a little bit like Job, look

into the Whirlwind and have to admit that I just don't understand what is going on. I know that I love the Universal House of Justice, and that I cherish Their every word, and that I pray for the strength to manifest the loving obedience required in our times.

[END DOCUMENT]

Finding Loopholes

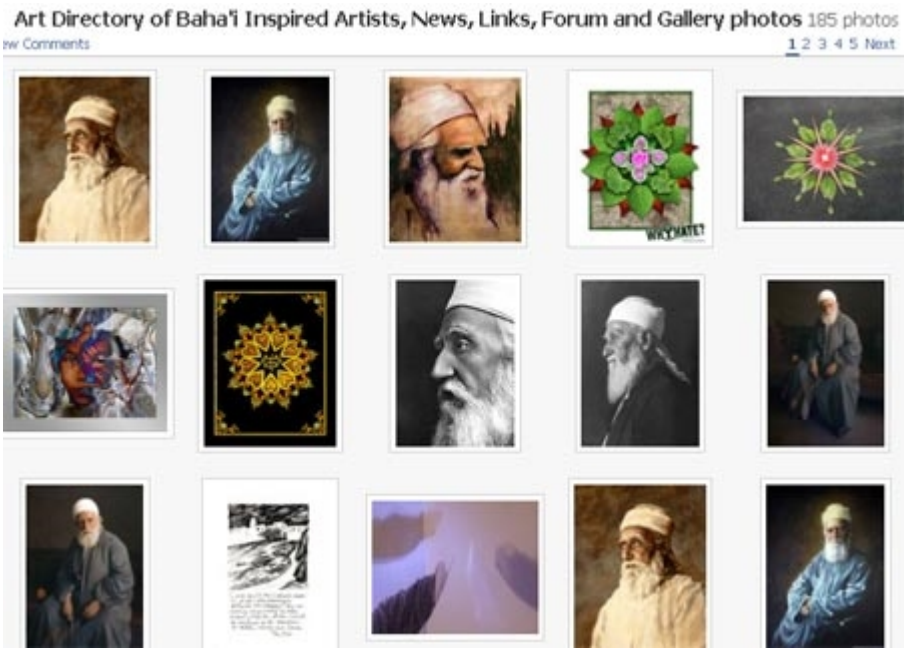

1. Explain Newton's First Law of Motion in your own words.
!
Yakka foob mog. grug pubba wup zink wattoom gazork. chumble spuzz.
I LOVE LOOPHOLES.

Freedom for Art is Unity in Diversity

Last Friday, I went to listen to Salman Rushdie present the "Leiden Freedom Lecture."

Salman Rushdie delivers the Leiden Freedom Lecture in the St. Pieters church, Leiden, The Netherlands 18 June 2010

Freedom, he argued is the essence of life and the essence of creativity. So many Baha'is have told me that to be a Bahai and an artist means that you need to be 'moderate'. Some, artists themselves, have presented all sorts of theories about art being at the service of something else, ranging from the idea of self-censorship in order not to offend to art as a framework for the lowest common denominator: the ubiquitous portrait paintings of 'Abdul-Baha.



Screenshot of the Art Directory of Baha'i Inspired Artists Facebook Group - 18 June 2010

Not all pages include as many portraits as this page happens to, but this is a good representation of much of what is labeled as art in a Baha'i context. I am not criticizing any of this art nor this forum. Mark Granfar, has created an open forum for artworks to be placed and artists could place other forms of art if they wished. My point is that this forum reflects what you see in the Baha'i community in general.

I'm not knocking portrait painting nor those who choose to paint these types of images of 'Abdul-Baha, but am asking where is the diversity, a tell-tale sign of freedom. Celebrations of 'oneness' wear a little thin, when that's the only story on offer by a community.

> When freedom of conscience, liberty of thought and right of speech prevail — that is to say, when every man according to his own idealization may give expression to his beliefs — development and growth are inevitable.
> (Abdu'l-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 197)

> (E)ach elemental atom of the universe has the opportunity of expressing an infinite variety of those individual virtues. No atom is bereft or deprived of this opportunity or right of expression.
> (Abdu'l-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 285)

When I was fresh out of art school, I happily made artworks on themes of peace, diversity, portrait-like pieces, and so on, and felt completely free to do so. It was encouraging that various Baha'is in my community appreciated what I was doing and some even bought my work.

Myriam Bargetze performing in Atras de um arbusto um papa - formigas esverdeia de vergonha (An ant eater hiding behind a bush - turns green out of embarrassment), in the Lisbon Botanical gardens, Portugal, 1990

I was aware of work such as Joseph Beuys' social sculpture projects and liked it, but it wasn't my world. If a Baha'i had been making such work, I wouldn't have thought this was 'immoderate', but because of the way I was living or perhaps because my Baha'i community was so open, whether art was 'moderate' or not, wasn't a question I had.

That was a few decades ago and in the years I've been making art, I've never felt I needed to censor what I make. In fact I don't think I could, and because I don't show my art in Baha'i contexts I don't have to think about this either. All good and fine.

However the 'stale air' is what I often encounter as art made, shown or discussed in Baha'i contexts. Perhaps this is the only possibility, that religious contexts cannot allow for too much artistic diversity? I've been told this and it sounds reasonable, however, how can art function if is not free? Other Baha'is have stated that the time for Baha'i art has not started yet, and I think to myself, 'oh so we sit around and wait, and like magic, something called Baha'i art will appear out of nothing?'

My view is that it started the second the Baha'i Revelation started and art was free.

> In this new century the attainment of science, arts and belles lettres, **whether divine or worldly, material or spiritual**, is a matter which is acceptable before God and a duty which is incumbent upon us all to accomplish…
> (my own emphasis added – Abdu'l-Baha, Tablets of Abdu'l-Baha v2, p. 448)

When I look at what is written about the arts and creativity, it seems to me that Baha'i art is not about having the same material form, but about diversity, about difference and freedom of expression. Many artists do as I do, operate outside of Baha'i contexts, partly because there is space outside of the Baha'i community to develop, and there's nothing wrong with this, and partly because there's no space for art in the Baha'i community. It is not censored (at least in my case), but it is not made welcome. How can art touch a religious context if it is never shown in one. As much as I love classical music, my heart sinks when I hear it as 'the music' at a feast, because there's no diversity.

In 2006, I called a workshop I gave at an Irish Baha'i summer school, "shocking art" where individuals could bring up the art that shocks them as a starting point for discussion. As it turned out, the individuals were all touched by contemporary art in some way and because of this had already developed their own dialogue. There was no need for me to show that 'shocking art' has a place in the world, and so in that context of freedom, I moved the workshop to exercises in expressing the new instead. We had clean air and so didn't need to protest.

Rushdie's metaphor got me thinking about how often Baha'is tell me off (usually online) for expressing what in their view is whining, when in my view it is critique. From their

perspective I'm polluting their clean air (of no dissent) while for me the air is stuffy because my critique is seen as not being acceptable for a Baha'i to make. I promise, I really would complain less if there was more dialogue. :-) Seriously though, when individuals have differences of opinion and it is assumed that each party is sincere, then the differing opinions can be worked on. If one or another writes something like "well you can leave", what that person is really saying is, your viewpoint does not belong here and mine does.

> The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions.
> (Abdu'l-Baha, Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha, p. 87)

I also think that if we don't have the freedom to express things that bother us, we can't process them, learn from them, learn from the differing ideas. I think the fact that one of the Baha'i months is called 'questions' indicates that this is part of human nature, part of the development of the spirit and something that is an ongoing aspect of Baha'i community life.

For me making a work of art is more about asking questions, wrestling with some experience, than presenting answers – although art is wonderfully slippery and so is about both and neither.

I do think any artist should have complete freedom of expression. As Rushdie stated, you have to make the effort to open a book to read it, have to walk into a bookshop or a library. No one is forced to encounter art. Likewise with art in a gallery. There's a lot of art I dislike, but some of it has inspired me to make art in response, and some of it I forget about. I'd be a poorer person if I hadn't experienced it and yet this is not the same as someone who willingly places themselves or another into a life-threatening situation.

In 2004, at a talk I gave for the Baha'is, I was asked how I would treat Mapplethorpe's photography in the context of Baha'i art. My answer was that it shouldn't be censored and that it was focused on the material, and art focused on materiality can be as effective as art focused on spirituality. From another perspective, a detailed realistic painting is as much about materiality as a work by Mapplethorpe.

On the topic of censorship, Salman Rushdie told the story of a Pakistani film ("International Gorillay" (International Guerillas) in which Rushdie, depicted as a Rambo-like figure, is portrayed as plotting to cause the downfall of Pakistan by opening a chain of

casinos and discos, tortures with audio recordings of his book, and was finally killed by a bolt of lighting sent from God!

The British Board of Film Classification refused to give it a certificate, meaning it would be banned in the U.K., because they feared they might be sued for the 25 or more instances of libel in the film. Rushdie said he didn't want to be part to something being censored and so wrote a statement to the board saying he would not sue for libel if the film was released. And so they then released it. A large theater was hired for its first showing in Muslim-dominated Bradford — and no one turned up. However if the movie had been banned, the fact of censorship would have made it popular. As it was, the work was judged according to its quality: a badly made movie not worth the cost of entry.

I'd argue that even if the unbanned film had become popular in the U.K., it would have served as a form of discourse. Having the freedom to express also means having the freedom to judge the work, and learn from it or its mistakes or misrepresentations. If a community doesn't have freedom, it doesn't have the mechanisms for diversity.

How do we know if a community has freedom: we look at the diversity of its artforms. There are two responses to this in relation to the Baha'i community. Lots of Baha'is are doing diverse highly creative work and Baha'is are part of the world. Second: if Baha'i communities wish to take advantage of this air of liberty, they have to create a opportunities for it.

A starting point would be to remove 'review', so there's no idea of 'right' and 'wrong' ways of expression. Of course I'm grateful to Baquia for allowing a freedom of expression on this blog. If Baquia hadn't, I wouldn't have made the effort to write this to start with.

This is what I mean by creating opportunities. If artists know that their art is welcome - however materialistic or issue-based- then they will start making an artwork in relation to the Baha'i community and when they do, we'll have the diversity needed for discourse to develop. As it stands at the moment, artists who are Baha'is such as myself, certainly make art inspired by the Baha'i writings and teachings, but what is missing is art and art discourse in relation to the Baha'i community. Perhaps this is a freedom only possible as a form of diaspora -from the point of view of an outsider. At least at the moment with the dominance of the Ruhi culture, this seems to be the case.

Frequency of the Word “Bahai” in English Books

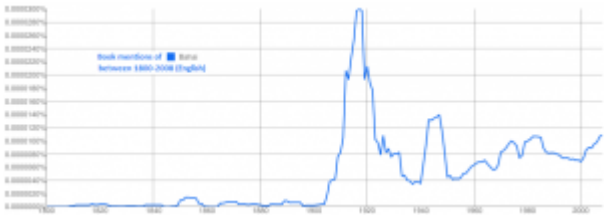
The eggheads at Google have done it again. After aggregating and digitizing more than 5.2 million books containing more than 500 billion words, they have unleashed a massive and searchable database of words used in those published works: the Google’s Book Ngram Viewer.

As you probably know, I’m a sucker for data-mining: Declining Internet Interest for "Baha’i". That was keeping track of the relative popularity of search incidents for the keyword “bahai”.

This new tool from Google is equally fascinating but it provides a different perspective. Whereas the previous one is a reflection of our modern times and our penchant for using google as a search engine to find answers on the internet, this new tool allows us to look at the usage frequency of certain words throughout history in published books.

Of course, I immediately typed in “Bahai” to see what it would show. Keep in mind that it is very sensitive to alternative spellings. So the word “Bahai” that I used will produce different results than the word “Baha’i” or the word “bahai” or “baha’i”. In the end, I chose to show you the graph for the word “Bahai” because it has the most frequent usage in Google’s database.

Take a look at the graph and see if you notice the same things that I did:



Click to see larger graph

The first ‘bump’ is 1850 which is right around the time of the Babi movement in Iran, which then morphed into the Baha’i Faith. It is surprising to see such an immediate – albeit

relatively small – reaction from the English press to this event halfway around the world. But then again, orientalists like E.G. Browne were deeply interested in the movement.

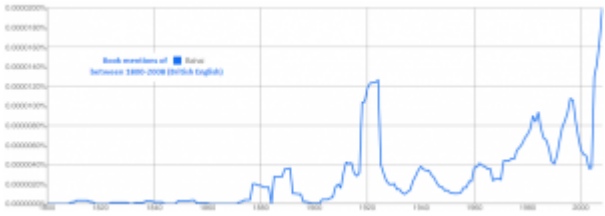
There is a clear spike between 1911 and 1918 (approximately). The line is smoothed with a smoothing coefficient of 3 – a setting which can be changed in the Ngram control panel. If you reduce the smoothing coefficient, there are two distinct spikes, one for 1915 and the other for 1919.

Knowing that Abdu'l-Baha's visit to the West took place between 1911 and 1913 provides a simple explanation for this sudden increase in exposure. And providing that we give a few years lag time for research and publication we have a very neat match for this sharp increase in the prevalence of the usage of the word "Bahai" in English books.

The second spike occurs a few decades later between 1944 and 1946. What might account for it? My hunch is that it is the outbreak of World War II and the inevitable soul searching that occurred in reaction to the horrific tragedy that is war.

The other standout years are 1973 and 1982. I'm not sure what 1973 corresponds to but 1982 would probably be explained by the Islamic revolution of Iran and the systemic persecution of Baha'is – which continues to this day.

Here is the same graph restricted to "British English":



Click to see larger graph

The prevalence of the word "Bahai" in British books is somewhat different. The first spike occurs in 1921. Then there are other spikes of activity in 1974 and 1981. And finally, most curious is the astounding increase in 2008 – the final year for which there is data.

Take a look yourself and see what sorts of things you can discover. As always, if you have any insight or comment, I'd love to hear about it below.

If searching through billions of words in the span of seconds isn't amazing enough, you can also bore down into the books themselves using the links provided at the bottom of the graph at the Google Ngram website and actually read where each mention is featured.

No related posts.

Full Movie: Baha'is In My Backyard

Here is the full movie (excuse two short commercial interruptions) **Baha'is In My Backyard**.

When you finish watching, drop me a comment below (anonymously if you wish) about your thoughts or reactions:

Alternatively, can watch the full video here.

Further Victories… for Incumbency

We just had another round of National Conventions around the world to elect National Spiritual Assemblies (NSA). For the most part it seems to have been another sound victory for incumbency. The nudge nudge, wink wink letter from the House of Justice, was, for the most part, largely ignored as the same people were elected to be members of the NSA.

In the United States, all 9 previous members were re-elected. The only difference being that long time (and yes, we mean loooong time) member and Secretary General Robert C. Henderson is now merely a member. The new Secretary General is Kenneth E. Bowers.

This might seem to be a negligible change. Only time will tell if the new Secretary General will chart a new course for the NSA of the United States and wake the rest of his colleagues from their slumber.

Over to the north of the 49th parallel, there were similar results with 8 of the previous 9 members of the NSA of Canada re-elected. The new member, replacing ex-ITC member Don (Otto) Rogers, is Bourna Noureddin, a doctorate student in electrical engineering.

Bourna is so new that they even spelled his name wrong! (I'm sure it will be corrected)

Global Currency Proposed By Russia

Writing in the *World Order of Baha'u'llah*, Shoghi Effendi envisioned the future:

> A mechanism of world inter-communication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity. A world metropolis will act as the nerve centre of a world civilization, the focus towards which the unifying forces of life will converge and from which its energizing influences will radiate. A world language will either be invented or chosen from among the existing languages and will be taught in the schools of all the federated nations as an auxiliary language to their mother tongue. A world script, a world literature, **a uniform and universal system of currency**, of weights and measures, will simplify and facilitate intercourse and understanding among the nations and races of mankind.

Keeping in mind that the above was written in 1938, you can't help but be awed by his prophetic vision. We can easily identify many of the things he outlines.

The internet – connecting everyone, almost instantaneously; allowing for the world to bear witness to the violent crushing of protests on the streets of Tehran.

A supplementary language? English obviously. It is spoken and taught in almost every place on earth. It has become the de facto language of commerce, naval and aerial navigation, computer programming, etc.

A uniform and universal system of weights and measures? The metric system is the standard in all but 3 countries.

And just recently – at the G-8 Summit in L'Aquila, Italy – Russian President Dmitry Medvedev called for a "supranational" world currency and to have something to show the world leaders, he gave them a sample coin minted in Belgium:

UNITY IN DIVERSITY
2009
TEST • LIMITED ISSUE

UNITED FUTURE WORLD CURRENCY

It even has a website: Future World Currency

UNITED FUTURE WORLD CURRENCY

To be fair, this is not the first coin to be inspired by the phrase ‘unity in diversity’. In 2006 India minted a 10 Rupee coin designed by National Institute of Design which had the symbolic representation of the concept: 4 lines and dots coming together:

I know that this proposal won't amount to much but it is remarkable news nevertheless. A world currency is still a long ways off, of course. But with the success of the Euro, which united Europe's main group of countries and has since expanded to several others, the idea of a supranational currency is easier to imagine. Who knows, this vision of Shoghi Effendi may come true sooner than we think.

By the way, does anyone have any reference of a global currency in the writings of either Abdu'l-Baha or Baha'u'llah? As far as I can tell, there aren't any but maybe I haven't looked hard enough.

No related posts.

God Wants You To Send Him Money

So here's some news:

Both the Baha'i community in the US and in Canada are in financial dire straits.

> In a urgent letter dated 5 February 2007, the National Spiritual Assembly informed… that, in response to its great concern about the present status of the Funds, it has asked its Treasurer and other members to visit major centres across the country before Ridvan, in order to speak directly with the friends about our response to the critical requirements of the second year of the Five Year Plan and "the pressing national and international needs of the Cause".

And in March the NSA of the United States informed all LSAs and Baha'i registered groups that the **budgetary shortfall for the year was projected to be more than 50%**.

The budget was for $25 million and with two months to go the contributions were $13.5 million.

Of course, this is “news” in the same way that violence in the Middle East is news.

It reminds me of a hilarious bit that George Carlin did a few years ago. He turned his acid tongue on the TV Christian evangelists and said:

“Religion has actually convinced people that there’s an invisible man living in the sky who watches everything you do, every minute of every day. And the invisible man has a special list of ten things he does not want you to do. And if you do any of these ten things, he has a special place, full of fire and smoke and burning and torture and anguish, where he will send you to live and suffer and burn and choke and scream and cry forever and ever ’til the end of time!

But He loves you. He loves you, and He needs money! He always needs money! He’s all-powerful, all-perfect, all-knowing, and all-wise, somehow just can’t handle money! Religion takes in billions of dollars, they pay no taxes, and they always need a little more.”

Alright, if I can address all the National treasurers in a huddle over here. As for the rest of you, I’ll give you another topic… The Partridge Family, neither family nor partridge, discuss.

The treasurers and I will be over here:

“ok, now listen up team. This isn’t that difficult. Money comes in. Money gets spent. Sure, we know that things aren’t going that well, what with the declining enrollments and the stagnation that has come about from the Ruhi-fication of Baha’i communities. But Come On !! This is not rocket surgery boys and girls!

As I said, money comes in. Money gets spent. As treasurer you have one job and one job only: make sure no more gets spent than comes in. Got that? Think you can handle that?

Alright, Richard, hit the lights, we have a special video presentation. Now this is advanced stuff, so you’ll have to pay real close attention. I know math isn’t most of your strong suits but if you concentrate, I have no doubt that you’ll get the complicated ideas in this video. Remember, you *will* be quizzed on this later.”

[lights turn down as the screen comes on...]

Guidelines For Baha’is Serving on Institutions

If you’ve ever served on an LSA or other Baha’i institution, these guidelines may be familiar to you:

(1) Insist on doing everything through “channels.” Never permit short-cuts to be taken in order to expedite decisions.

(2) Make “speeches.” Talk as frequently as possible and at great length. Illustrate your “points” by long anecdotes and accounts of personal experiences. Never hesitate to make a few appropriate “patriotic” comments.

(3) When possible, refer all matters to committees, for "further study and consideration." Attempt to make the committees as large as possible — never less than five.

(4) Bring up irrelevant issues as frequently as possible.

(5) Haggle over precise wordings of communications, minutes, resolutions.

(6) Refer back to matters decided upon at the last meeting and attempt to re-open the question of the advisability of that decision.

(7) Advocate “caution.” Be "reasonable” and urge your fellow-conferees to be “reasonable” and avoid haste which might result in embarrassments or difficulties later on.

(8) Be worried about the propriety of any decision — raise the question of whether such action as is contemplated lies within the jurisdiction of the group or whether it might conflict with the policy of some higher echelon.

Even though you may not have seen them spelled out exactly as above, you probably have seen most of these guidelines implemented if you’ve ever served on an assembly, council

or other institution. Heck, you may have even done exactly one or two or more of them yourself.

Guess what?

They come from a 1944 CIA manual on how to sabotage an organization from within.

You can view and download the whole declassified document: Simple Sabotage Field Manual (see page 28 for the excerpt above).

Guy Consolmagno: Religion & Science

Fascinating talk by Guy Consolmagno, Vatican astronomer, discussing science and religion:

Click here for the full hour long program.

Guy Consolmagno believes that science and religion should work together rather than against one another. In a 2006 interview he said:

> "Religion needs science to keep it away from superstition and keep it close to reality, to protect it from creationism, which at the end of the day is a kind of paganism – it's turning God into a nature god. And science needs religion in

> order to have a conscience, to know that, just because something is possible, it may not be a good thing to do."

Hmmm, that is a clunky version of what Abdu'l-Baha eloquently said many years ago:

> Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism.

Is it possible Guy Consolmagno has read Abdu'l-Baha?

Habemus Rottweiler…er Papam

After choosing the new Pope, the Cardinals filed past in single file and kneeled before Ratzinger. But then again, this was just formalizing a state of affairs which has existed for the past 20 or so years.

Much will be made of Ratzinger, or Benedict XVI, and his past. His youthful and naive indiscretion of belonging briefly to the infamous Hitler Youth has already been publicly exposed. But a much more alarming history will need to be glossed over. And indeed, the spin doctors have already began to work furiously.

Ratzinger was the Dean of the College of Cardinals but he held another much more important office. He was the head of the 'Congregation for the Docrine of Faith' – the institution which was entrusted with the responsability and authority to maintain doctrinal orthodoxy and protect the Catholic Church. Ratzinger was the head of this institution for 24 years. But before he came onto the scene – much earlier in fact – it was known by another name: the Holy Office of the Inquisition.

While occupuying this important position, Ratzinger held true to the legacy of his predecessors. Although he didn't resort to thumbscrews and burnings at the stake,

Ratzinger still got his way and anyone who disagreed with him was bullied into silence or excommunicated.

He was a polarizing figure. One who was most at ease in combat and debate – using his highly sharpened skills of rhetoric to plow through opponents. In his now infamous essay, *"Dominus Iesus"* he set out in no uncertain terms his belief that the only true path was the Catholic Church. In it, he also assailed the pluralism and moderation that so many other Cardinals had embraced. He also railed against what he called "cafeteria Catholics" who chose to use birth-control and homosexuals whom he said were an "intrinsic, moral evil".

Ratzinger was, plainly put, the enforcer of the Vatican. While Pope John Paul II went around in public looking as soft and pink as a puppy, he was behind the curtains ripping apart anyone who strayed from 'doctrine'. During his years as the enforcer, he gained a nickname which he no doubt accepted with pride; that of 'God's Rottweiler'. It was given to him quite deservingly as he worked diligently to bully, browbeat, and pressure any and all internal sources of pluralism and liberalism. He used all the tools at his disposal: financial incentives (both given and taken away), appointing or moving around high ranking clergy, and threatening ex-communication (as well as carrying it out on several occasions). He was also the pointman when it came for the Vatican to defuse the sex abuse scandal that rocked the Catholic Church. Not surprisingly, his response was to viciously attack the victims and the media on charges of sensationalism and exaggeration.

On his watch the voices of dissent, liberalism and pluralism either retreated into self-imposed silence, capitulated into accepting Ratzinger's position or were excommunicated. Yet his actions shook up the Catholic Church and left it divided and many times at odds with itself.

I find it a bit tragic that someone so extremist and close-minded is now occupying such an important position. And yet, I'm not surprised at all by this turn of events. It has been my experience that the persons who gain higher and higher offices, those who are either appointed or elected to positions of authority, usually tend to have rather aggressive personalities and a somewhat extremist bent.

You simply do not find someone who is meek and gentle (those that pause to make sure that everyone has their say in a meeting, for example) going *up the ladder*, as it were – other than the Unitarian Jihadists, that is. Instead, it is almost always the person whose

forceful character steamrolls over other's and bullies them into either silence or reluctant acceptance of their position – if for nothing other than to just keep the peace and unity of the group. I've personally seen this in many organizations. And unfortunately the Baha'i administration is no exception.

The ascent and past of Ratzinger is all to familiar because it parallels the ascent and past of ITC members and Counsellors who see their duty the 'protection' of the Faith. I'm not sure by what feats of logic they convince themselves that they can hold such a position or to keep secret files on individual Baha'is. But somehow they do. And not surprisingly it is these same individuals who are becoming members of the Universal House of Justice.

I also see many parallels between the voices in the Catholic Church that Ratzinger worked so hard to silence, and the marginalized voices within the Baha'i Faith. Perhaps there is a lesson we can learn here.

No related posts.

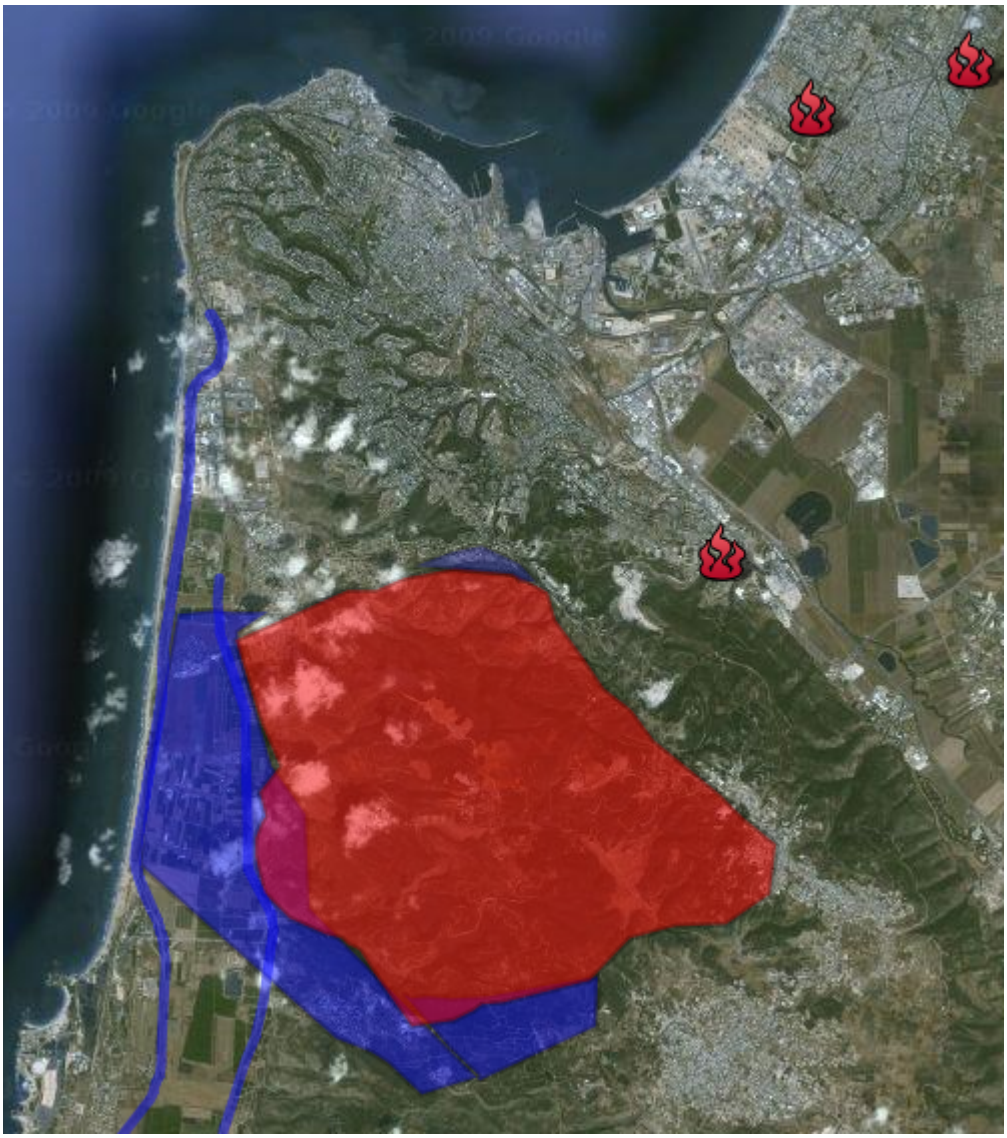
Haifa Fire Does Not Threaten Baha'i World Centre

After the driest conditions in 60 years, the region of Northern Israel has been on fire for the past few days. The fire is thought to have started near the Druze village of Isfiya (Osfiya/ Ussefia) and quickly spread north. A bus carrying prisoners from Damon prison and their guard escort were caught in the fire and perished. A total of 42 people are thought to have died but forensic examination is continuing because the remains are so badly affected by the fire.

The fire moved up to Haifa University and was so close to the Denya district that many there were evacuated. But the fire then moved west and is now hopefully contained in the Carmel Hai-Bar Nature preserve (the green area to the left of Haifa University):

As you can see from the map, before the fire can even approach the Baha'i World Centre on Mount Carmel, the fire would have to hypothetically go through several major residential neighbourhoods. There is very little risk of that and with international help, Israel will hopefully be able to contain the fire and put it out by the weekend. Cyprus, Egypt, Jordan, France, UK, Croatia, Russia, Spain, and Romania have sent firefighting airplanes to Israel to combat the fire.

Here is a map showing the fire areas in red and the evacuation areas in blue (thanks to Steve at Bahaisonline.net):



You can keep up to date with the dynamic version of this map.

Update:

You can see some stunning pictures of the Haifa fire here.

Happy Naw Ruz: Baha’i Era 168

Source: Spring by morning_rumtea

> The Divine Springtime is come, O Most Exalted Pen, for the Festival of the All-Merciful is fast approaching. Bestir thyself, and magnify, before the entire creation, the name of God, and celebrate His praise, in such wise that all created things may be regenerated and made new. Speak, and hold not thy peace. The day star of blissfulness shineth above the horizon of Our name, the Blissful, inasmuch as the kingdom of the name of God hath been adorned with the ornament of the name of thy Lord, the Creator of the heavens. Arise before the nations of the earth, and arm thyself with the power of this Most Great Name, and be not of those who tarry.
>
> Baha’u’llah, Gleanings from the Writings of Baha’u’llah

Happy Naw Ruz Everyone!

To one and all… Happy Naw Ruz !

May the coming year bring a bountiful harvest of blessings to you and your family.

Don’t forget to set out your ’7 S’ table!

Haft S?n (??? ???) or the seven ‘S’s is a major tradition of Norouz. The haft sin table includes seven items specific starting with the letter S or S?n (?) in Persian alphabet). The items symbolically correspond to seven creations and holy immortals protecting them. Originally called Haft Chin (??? ???), the Haft Sin has evolved over time, but has kept its symbolism. Traditionally, families attempt to set as beautiful a Haft S?n table as they can, as it is not only of traditional and spiritual value, but also noticed by visitors during Norouzi visitations and is a reflection of their good taste.

The Haft Sin items are:

* sabzeh – wheat, barley or lentil sprouts growing in a dish – symbolizing rebirth
* samanu – a sweet pudding made from wheat germ – symbolizing affluence
* senjed – the dried fruit of the oleaster tree – symbolizing love
* s?r – garlic – symbolizing medicine
* s?b – apples, – symbolizing beauty and health
* somaq – sumac berries – symbolizing (the color of) sunrise
* serkeh – vinegar – symbolizing age and patience

To learn all you ever wanted to know about Naw Ruz or Nou Ruz:

Nou Ruz – from a cultural and historic point of view
Naw Ruz – from a religious (Babi and Baha’i Faith) point of view

Here and There

In this latest correspondence, Baha'i Rants would like to bring to your attention some interesting little places on the world wide web. Some may make you yawn and others may blow your mind – compelling you to press the little envelope button at the bottom to share the link with your friends. Whatever the outcome, chances are good that this may end up as yet another continuing featurette at Baha'i Rants.

Apparently, it has become *de rigueur* within Baha'i youth culture today to set up webzines. First we brought to your attention SPIRITUAL DEGREES (which we are happy to add is gearing up for its next issue), and now we stumble onto ONE – a rather upbeat and funky 'zine which mainly takes a decidedly artistic view of things (you know, poetry, pictures, stories, stuff like that). They even have a blog of their own! This trend is heartening but Baha'i Rants looks forward to the day when real issues of significance to the community are discussed rather than the current fluff articles and banal dibblings of poetry.

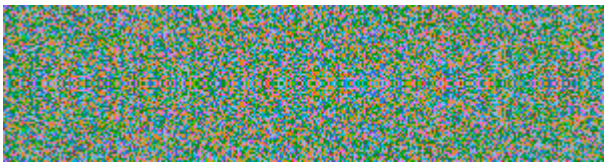
As you may know, Baha'i Rants has made some grumbling noises about the lack of action from the Baha'i world community in the field of social and economic development – or the now non-politically correct word *charity*. But never let it be said that we do not give credit where credit is due:

Border of Darfur, Sudan and Chad

Here is a neat little website created by the Baha'is in the Netherlands, I mean Holland; Dutch . . . yes, Dutch Baha'is (I think that's what they prefer being called). Its a different take on the usual introductory material, so extra points for creativity. But it might be a little hard to navigate until you realize that those little squares that change color are actually links or menu choices. Once you figure that out, you're flying. Next time you want to introduce someone to the Faith, be a bit imaginative and give out this link instead of the usual bahai.org URL.

Yahoo!Groups is home to quite a number of interesting Baha'i communities. Some, like the venerable, Talisman, have been going on for some time and others, like Baha'i Monitor, have just started. This new group however, is not for discussions. It's purpose is to 'monitor' and archive news which may be of interest to Baha'is worldwide; and to that end it follows a no nonsense editorial policy (found in the Files section). I think it is commendable project because presently, all formal news channels are under the auspices of the Administration and as such, there is no real 'freedom of the press'. As well, it makes sense to have a centralized place for all Baha'i news drifting out there in cyberspace.

By nature, Baha'i Rants is rather skeptical (some would even say cynical or jaundiced, or worse) but a visit here left quite an impression. Scientifically speaking, humanity doesn't know much, really, about this thing called reality. We paw and snap in the dark, like emaciated hyenas, trying to grab something, anything tangible. Maybe this is what Baha'u'llah (and all the other Messengers of God) meant when they insisted upon the unity and interconnectedness of all – that God is one, humanity is one and all the religions are one. Could it be that we truly are 'one soul' as Larry Rowe likes to say?



Random or Connected?

To learn more, you might want to start with their own website (click above) or the relevant Wiki page. Some of the experiments and concepts also remind me of the excellent book by Malcolm Gladwell, called *Blink*. Being a skeptic, I'd like to see a team of statisticians not involved in the project analyse their accumulated data – especially looking for the null hypothesis. Also, one has to remember that correlation doesn't mean causation – otherwise one would say that eating a lot of ice cream causes hot weather. Until then, I'll just daydream that it is indeed true – what a world that would be. You, of course, can decide for yourself (independant investigation of truth and all that ball of wax).

No related posts.

Here and There II

Recently a Baha'i was inspired from discussions on Talisman to begin a group dedicated to formulating Alternative Learning Institutions. I'm glad to pitch in with a few measely ideas of my own in the hopes of contributing to its success. Its necessary to go beyond criticisim (however well deserved) and demonstrate a clear alternative that is better than the status quo. The only thing that will overcome the inertia of apathy and the group think of top-down imposed Ruhi institutionalization is the success of an alternative. I don't think this is a particularly difficult challenge since Ruhi is now in its 5th year of world wide implementation and it has yet to show any significant evidence of efficacy. If you want to be part of this endeavour, you can join the Alternative Learning Institute Yahoo!Group.

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A new website, the Heyday, has been created by and for the Baha'i youth of Australia. It looks pretty comprehensive with not only current events but multimedia, a few regular columns, discussion forums and even an advice column by 'Ace'. Its similar to Baha'i Youth (the US site) as well as the now defunct MJBaha'i (the Latin American site). Needless to say, you don't have to be an Australian youth to use it. So if you know a Baha'i youth who would benefit, point them in the right direction.

****

There are quite alot of Baha'i related websites with new ones popping up every day it seems. But it is very confusing when you see one that purports to be one thing and then is something entirely another. Take for example the bizarre Yahoo!Group: Afghan Baha'i. In its introductory blurb it says "In this Website you will learn more about AFGHAN BAHA'IS…"

Along with many other Baha'is I am interested to know how the Baha'is are doing there after such a harrowing time under the oppression of the Taliban. So, silly me, I joined and hoped to find out some good news about the renewed activities and freedoms they enjoy. I was baffled when the only thing that appeared, day after day, week after week and month after month, was the reposting of Baha'i World News Service stories – which had nothing to do with Afghan Baha'is, inside or outside Afghanistan. But don't bother trying to point

out the inanity of the whole thing. Apparently the creator and moderator of the group is completely immune to logic.

****

It's dead, Jim.

I'm. Sorry. I. Really am.

Just like you, I hoped that Spiritual Degrees would tackle some of the difficult issues which most Baha'is sweep under the rug. And bless them, their heart seemed to be in the right place (give or take a few inches). But when when Bones says it's dead, its dead.

****

The trend of podcasting seems to have finally been embraced by Baha'is. As well as Alison's which I've already mentioned, here are a few other ones:

- Beautiful World
- Podcast.net: search by **keywords** "Bahai"
- Karen Bacquet's first (of many) podcast

But although this may be relatively new to the Baha'i region of the internet many others have been quite active for a while now. I stumbled upon one such podcast in this blog. It is an interview with a Baha'i describing her personal journey towards the Faith.

The audio clip, at almost an hour, is rather longish. And I also would be remiss if I did not add a cautionary note for listeners with sensitive constitutions: it contains material of a rather *graphical nature* regarding the wanton masculinity of a certain Burl Barer and its unintended consequences on a hapless young girl. But then again, all is fair in teaching and consolidating, right? Now that you have been duly warned…what are you waiting for? clicky, clicky!

****

Baha'i World is a great website for keeping up to date with conferences and such. I'm mentioning it so that more become familiar with it and actually use it so that it can get over the critical mass hump and really become useful. Go ahead and add your local Baha'i

activities and events. Get the word out through the internet and you'll be surprised at how many will show up. Also pass it on to others so they can do the same with their events. Just make sure you put up your event ahead of time to give people a chance to find it and attend.

****

Badi has started a personal blog. I'm always happy to read the thoughtful comments of other Baha'is about real substantial matters (not to be confused with the sort of drivel that gets put up on most blogs by Baha'is: I ate pizza… my cat had a bowel movement… etc.). The only thing is Badi's blog is in Spanish. So if you 'no habla espa?ol' … get with the Universal Auxiliary Language already !!

Hibernating Blowbacks

If nothing else, the CIA is a great factory for euphemisms. They have a knack for spinning anything and everything under the sun. One of my favourite new ones they have developed is 'Blowback'.It is a label applied to a situation where an action (usually an intervention or interference) by the US has caused a series of consequences which are rather unsavory and unwanted. Or, to put it in other terms, its what they call it when what the CIA or other arm of the US does something with a specific intention of preserving or promoting American interests but which comes back to bite them in the ass.Blowback.

Its neat, isn't it? Almost sounds innocent and harmless. 'Oh, that was just some blowback from the policies of the '80s.' That's a much easier sentence to swallow than, 'we armed the Taliban and fanned the flames of their fundamentalism and now its come back to haunt us with untold civilian and military deaths.' I think you'll agree that given a choice, any beaurocrat would go with the first.

I mention this because I'm seeing a lot of parallels between the political situation right now in the US and the situation in the Baha'i Faith. In both cases you have people at the top who are making same wacky decisions which have to be followed by everyone else (or else). Where the group at the top has become insular and rejects outright anything which may clash with their carefully constructed view of reality. And in both cases you have a

hostile environment whereby any dissent, criticism, and questions are enough to make others question your loyalty.

In the American case, they question the loyalty of a citizen who dares have an opinion which is not in lock-step with the Administration and in the Baha'i case, they question the loyalty of any believer who dares have an opinion which is not in lock-step with the Administration.

In both cases, the media are a carefully manipulated tool. And in both cases, heavy consequences are doled out for anyone who dares openly question or oppose in any way the stance of the Administration. What's more, that person's very moral fiber is put into doubt. And they are attacked on a personal level. You are with us or you are against us. The situation has reached such an intensity that it has polarized people into camps.

Blogs like this exist because of 'blowback' for policies which were adopted and ruthlessly implemented in the early 80s (all the way up to now). But even so, I know that atleast in the Baha'i Faith, everyone is really interested in improving the community. Yes, even me. Sure, I may write in a frank manner which is not familiar with most Baha'is but the only reason why I put the effort into this is because I care about the Faith. I'm not ready to give up on it. I want things to get better and I'm here offering my criticism, viewpoints, ideas and suggestions which I hope will make a contribution to that end. You may not like what I say or the way I say it but I don't think that has to do with me as much as the fact that Baha'is have gotten used to such suger-coating. Or outright euphemisms.

Take for example the interview with long-time (his butt imprint is literaly etched on the chair) Canadian National Treasurer, Husayn Banani by a Yukon newspaper in December of 2004. The interview and following quotes appeared in an article with the caption of "Million Dollar Baha'i Retreat for Sale". As the title says, its about the decision of the Baha'i Canadian community to sell the Yukon Baha'i Center. Apparently, there just isn't enough demand (use) for the facility and the community is not able to meet the expenses of operating it. Ironically, the Canadian National Assembly had just spent $250,000 to fix it up after a fire a few years ago (when technically, the priority was the Arc Project). And strangely enough, the local Baha'i assembly holds feast and other meetings by renting a Masonic Hall. So what did Banani say faced with such a situation? Here's a quote from the article:

“Some people have left the Faith, but, really very few,” he says. “Some people have gone into hibernation.”

Now some of you may cynically say that Banani was spinning or using a *euphemism*. But we at Baha’i Rants have, through covert operations deep inside the frozen Canadian tundra, been able to retreive irreproachable proof that, in fact, the Baha’is in Canada *are* hibernating. Don’t ask us how we got this picture. The lives of our operatives are at risk and we can not divulge any of our super secret CIA training. . .damn! I have said too much.

Here we see a noble specimen of the endangered species, Bahairsus Canadaenus, in a state of deep hibernation. Left alone, it will sleep through the lean winter months and wake up in the spring to rummage around for Ruhi courses and to attend various committee meetings.

No related posts.

Highlight From US National Convention

Here is a full audio transcript of the closing address by Continental Counsellor Rebequa Murphy to the US National Convention. Bolded text is for emphasis and my comments are in square brackets:

[BEGIN TRANSCRIPT]

It is wonderful the manner in which the friends immediately focused their consultation on that 19 April letter. And you know, to me, what that letter says to us, what the House of Justice is saying in that letter, "O People of Baha, Erase every doubt from your heart and soul." If there is even a trace of doubt, you know in the Seven Valleys, Baha'u'llah says if a wayfarer travels for a hundred thousand years and yet doesn't behold the face of the beloved he shouldn't be discouraged, and the House isn't saying a hundred thousands of years, they're just saying for 5 years [laughter background]. Be patient, be patient, be patient, don't allow doubt to creep into your heart and don't allow the doubt of other people, no matter how well it is articulated, no matter how many times it is repeated, don't allow that doubt to enter your heat. You have to weed that out of your heart.

And on that first day, Penny [Walker – sent from the ITC by the UHJ] said that the Ridvan message is a lense. A lense through which we can see the progress of the Faith. The lense is that of the House of Justice, to look through that lense, we have to put our own lense aside.

We don't want to be those people that want to see God with their own eyes or hear His melodies with their own ears. Because we've been given the gift of being able to see through the eyes of the House of Justice and listen through the ears of the House of Justice.

So when we look at the progress of the Faith, even if our little "C" cluster is stuggling; even if our "A" cluster is not yet seeing growth, no doubt should reside in our hearts. Because when we see the progress of the Faith through the eyes of the House of Justice, then we will be able to see the victory of others as our own victory. The victory of those friends in Mongolia as our victory.

[END TRANSCRIPT]

****

> Rely upon God, thy God, and the Lord of thy fathers. For the people are wandering in the paths of delusion bereft of discernment to see God with their own eyes, or hear His Melody with their own ears. Thus have We found them, as thou also dost witness.
> Thus have their superstitions become veils between them and their own hearts and kept them from the path of God, the Exalted, the Great.
> *Baha'u'llah – Tablet of Ahmad*

> O Son of Spirit!
> The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice, turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor. Ponder this in thy heart, how it behoveth thee to be. Verily justice is my gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.
> *Baha'u'llah – Hidden Words*

History of the Babis of Nayriz

Ahang Rabbani has been doing some research into the history of the Babis of Nayriz and shares his findings, among many other papers, on his website.

The central features of the upheavals of Nayr?z are known to those who have read about the millenarian B??b? religious movement of nineteenth-century Qajar Iran. Next to the incident of Zanj??n, where nearly two thousand B??b?s perished, the B??b?s of Nayr?z in 1850 lost more men, women and children in the fiery ordeals that surrounded them than any other B??b? community of that country. Moreover, unlike the other major B??b? incidents, the conflicts in this town were not limited to the one pogrom, but continued to unfold unabated for several more years and in the process took the lives of many hundreds more of the B??b's followers.

Ahang's e-book is an attempt to tell the story of the leading figure of that uprising, Vah?d D??r??b?, and to bring a number of historical documents pertaining to these episodes of Nayr?z along with a brief analysis to the attention of English-speaking students of the Faith in hope that it will stimulate further research and study.

The current e-book is an on-going project and as such comments and critical feedback would be appreciated and acknowledged.

No related posts.

Homosexuality: Blueprint or Recipe?

While reading Richard Dawkins' collection of essays in "The Devil's Chaplain" I chanced on his essay about the potential for genes to determine homosexuality in humans and what implications that might have.

Since we had discussed this point before in The Challenge of Homosexuality, Dawkins take on things was rather surprising:

Imagine the following newspaper headline: 'Scientists discover that homosexuality is caused.' Obviously this is not news at all; it is trivial. Everything is caused. To say that homosexuality is caused by genes is more interesting, and it has the aesthetic merit of discomforting politically-inspired bores, but it doesn't say more than my trivial headline does about the irrevocability of homosexuality.

You can read the whole essay here (it is only 3 pages).

House of Baha'u'llah in Baghdad Destroyed – BREAKING

Communique from the Universal House of Justice – June 27, 2013:

> With shattered hearts, we have received news of the destruction of the Most Great House — the House of Baha'u'llah in Baghdad. While the precise circumstances attending this outrageous violation are as yet unclear, its immediate consequence is without doubt, and must be emphatically stated: The peoples of the world have been robbed of a sanctuary of incalculable sacredness.
>
> So deplorable an act, coming on the eve of the unprecedented worldwide convocation of Baha'u'llah's young followers and their friends, calls to mind that mysterious interplay of crisis and victory through which His indestructible, irrepressible, inexorable purpose will finally be consummated.
>
> We supplicate the Blessed Beauty to confer upon His faithful followers throughout the world fortitude and resolve in the face of this grievous blow. More information will be provided as it becomes available.

Analysis and Thoughts

The house of Baha'u'llah in Baghdad has a storied past. It is or, rather, was located in the North East section of present day Baghdad. Before the capital grew to reach and envelop it, al-Kadhimiya or Kazmain was a town 5 kilometers outside of Baghdad. It was and remains a pilgrimage site for Shi'ite Muslims due to the location of al-Kadhimiya mosque and shrine complex where the earthly remains of the Seventh and Ninth Imams rest. In fact the small town grew around the mosque and shrine which was named after the Seventh Imam (Musa al-Kadhim). Click for a Google Map view

Due to its proximity to the shrines the House of Baha'u'llah had been used as a hostel for Shi'ite pilgrims coming from Iraq and the surrounding countries. As you can imagine, due to its location to the Shi'ite shrine, the idea of returning the property to the Baha'i authorities is out of the question. Even if the government of Iraq was so inclined (which they obviously were and are not) the political and religious milieu would never allow it. The proximity of Sadr city doesn't help either.

And yet, since the overthrow of Saddam Hussain and the re-establishment of the Baha'i community (with the election of the new NSA of the Baha'is of Iraq in 2004) the Baha'i World Centre had started the process of attempting to regain ownership of the property.

They were able to broach the subject at various times and with different levels of the civil government as well as with the US and other nations undertaking reconstruction operations in Iraq. All avenues of dialogue failed to yield any results.

Although we do not have confirmation of this, it is my opinion that the destruction of the house was a deliberate act to accomplish two major objectives: first, to remove the question of ownership – as there is nothing left standing to own (except of course the land) – and second, to build in its place a larger and more modern pilgrim hostel which will accommodate more Muslims and further remove the possibility of returning the property to Baha'is.

While the destruction of the house is a major blow to the hopes of Baha'is everywhere, the Baha'i World Centre does have the necessary architectural plans and pictures to reconstruct the building. But they will be unable to do so if in its place stands a new, larger Shi'ite pilgrim hostel. Even if the land is now returned to the Baha'i international community, rebuilding the house of Baha'u'llah would entail the destruction of the newly built pilgrim house and that would be simply out of the question for obvious reasons.

Allow me to repeat that this is merely conjecture on my part. But it is based on an understanding of the various stakeholders and their motivations; including the current Iraqi government controlled by Shi'ites, the Iranian government (which is more or less running the show in Iraq today), the high value of real estate in Baghdad and specifically this neighborhood, etc. Needless to say, I hope that I am wrong.

But if the above does come to pass, it will have severe consequences for Baha'is everywhere. Not only because as Baha'is we abhor the destruction and desecration of yet another holy place but also because of the spiritual significance of this particular building.

While most Baha'is are comfortable with the idea of pilgrimage meaning a trip to Haifa, Israel and the surrounding areas (Bahji, Akka, Mazra'ih), this is simply wrong. None of those places are Baha'i sites of pilgrimage. If this 'little known fact' surprises you then you're not alone. Most Baha'is today unfortunately don't know any better.

This common ignorance is due to two reasons: first, both actual pilgrimage sites are inaccessible and second, the Universal House of Justice incorrectly uses the word pilgrimage (*hajj*) to refer to the act of visiting the significant Baha'i sites in the Holy Land instead of the correct word: visitation (*ziarat*).

Upon a superficial investigation you will find that the common answer to this concern is that Abdu'l-Baha designated the Shrine of Baha'u'llah at Bahji (the Point of Adoration) as a place of pilgrimage. The source of this is note 54 of the Aqdas but I have been unable to find the actual supporting source. That is, in which tablet does Abdu'l-Baha write this? What is the exact quote? It is curious that a proper source is not provided anywhere and even more curious that for the average Baha'i this is enough.

Now that the House of Baha'u'llah has been destroyed, and may be replaced by a new Shi'ite pilgrim hostel, removing it permanently from the grasp of Baha'is, what are Baha'is to do? I suppose we can continue to do what we are doing now; pretend that the trip to Israel is actually pilgrimage.

But that is a rather hollow pretense. Baha'i pilgrimage is obligatory and has been enjoined upon all (except those who are unable of course) and so understandably, Baha'is wish to go. But they can't really.

This presents an interesting thought experiment. What is special about a holy place? is it the brick and mortar and shingles? if it is those things, then through the eventual passage of time the structure will need to be renovated or replaced. And it is reasonable to expect that over enough time it will be renovated and restored to such an extent that it is completely replaced with new material.

Is what makes the holy site 'special' the location? That is, we can rebuild the building with new material, as Baha'is hope and plan to for both site of pilgrimage, and it would still be 'special'? what if we are somehow able to use a very large earth move or other construction machinery to uproot the building whole from the ground it sits upon and re-locate it? is the earth under it now 'special'? is the building in another location just as special?

These questions may seem facetious to you but I submit that they are not. What are your thoughts? Please share them in the comments below.

Update:
The Universal House of Justice has shared this letter with the Baha'is of the world as an update to the tragic events described above:

House of Justice Letter April 19 2007 – Response To NSA US

The refreshing acknowledgment of reality contained in the Annual Report from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States drew a swift and scathing response from the House of Justice.

You can read the response of the House of Justice (Adobe PDF document) to the legitimate concerns of the NSA of the United States regarding the perilous condition of the Baha'i community in that country.

You can also find the April 19th 2007 letter from the House, here as a simple HTML file.

So severe was the rebuke that the House of Justice forced the delegates to not base their consultation within the National Convention on the NSA's Annual Report but instead on their own spin (the April 19th 2007 letter above). And to show that they meant business, they sent an enforcer: Ms. Penelope Walker from the International Teaching Center. She delivered the message of the House to the delegates, made sure that the focus of the convention was on the letter from the House and that reality did not creep in into the consultations.

Furthermore, the convention's consultation would be based on the letter from the UHJ, not the annual report from the NSA. The coup de grace was when the National Spiritual Assembly formally asked delegates to the 98th Baha'is National Convention to refer to the April 19, 2007 letter from the House as the basis of their reports to the Baha'is nationwide on the Convention – and not the annual report from the NSA. So the vast majority of the Baha'is in the community, who hadn't attended the convention would not even learn of the major concerns from their own NSA.

So effectively was her duty performed that Counsellor Rebequa Murphy said in the closing remarks of the National Convention:

> We don't want to be those people that want to see God with their own eyes or hear His melodies with their own ears. Because we've been given the gift of

being able to see through the eyes of the House of Justice and listen through the ears of the House of Justice.

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New meditation pose suggested by Counsellor Rebequa Murphy

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Timeline:

1. Document: US NSA Feast Letter (Jalal/Glory)
   Time: April 8th 2007
   This letter contains the (in)famous 50% decline statistic.
2. Document: US NSA Annual Report
   Time: April 12th 2007
   A refreshing dose of reality: the Baha'i community in the US is in a perilous state.
3. Document: UHJ Letter to US NSA in response to US annual report
   Time: April 19th 2007
   A rebuke to the US NSA Annual Report: presented to delegates of US convention on April 27th, 2007 as a substitute to the US NSA's Annual Report. Ms. Penny Walker ITC counsellor sent to US convention to supervise this change of focus.

4. Document: UHJ Ridvan Message to world
   Time: April 21, 2007
   This is an annual letter sent from the House of Justice.

5. Document: US NSA Feast letter (Jamal/Beauty)
   Time: April 27th, 2007

In this letter the NSA, obedient to the UHJ, requests that Baha'is study UHJ's Ridvan message.

****

In their letter, the House of Justice sweeps aside nonchalantly the methodical reasoning of the NSA and their multi-pronged approach aimed to save the hemorrhaging Baha'i community. In its stead, the House of Justice posits a simple strategy: more of the same.

While the NSA is struggling valiently to break free of the constraints of the "framework": "We feel a particular need for flexibility and innovation…" the House of Justice provides clear guidance: "…what is essential is for such roles and functions to take shape within the framework for action that has been elaborated in the message dated 27 December 2005…".

While the NSA is attempting to acknowledge the marginalization of the LSAs: "…there is a pervasive feeling of confusion and dislocation among many Local Spiritual Assemblies, including those in 'A' clusters." the House of Justice responds: "In every cluster the institutions and agencies guiding the process — the Auxiliary Board members and the institute, together with the Area Teaching Committee — need to examine the dynamics of growth on a regular basis…". So basically tough luck! No elected institutions need apply.

In conclusion, the House insisits that Baha'i communities must follow the same "framework for action" that has (by the NSA's own observation) failed to produce results, that has marginalized LSAs, caused conflict within the community, lead to a stagnant Baha'i community, straitjacketed the community's dynamism and robbed it of the freedom of individual initiatives.

The next five years should be interesting!

Here are my own heretical questions:

How will we know, specifically, if this whole Ruhi/core curriculum/institutes process is succeeding? what metrics will we have to watch? what time frame will have to elapse? is there any point or event or situation in which we may potentially acknowledge that it didn't work? what would that be?

Of course, I'm spiritually weak. If I were strong as Counsellor Murphy I would comprehend that although the US Baha'i community has hit the event horizon and is at

imminent negative absolute growth, we shouldn't allow this fact to dissuade us from following the UHJ's guidance.

I would realize that reality, is not the yardstick by which we should judge the efficacy of "X-Year" plans. I would understand that rather than use our own eyes and ears as Baha'u'llah instructed us, we should see things and hear things through the eyes and ears of the House.

And that although the largest, most dynamic Baha'i community in the world is fast spinning down the tubes, we should not be alarmed nor let doubt enter our mind in the least. Rather, we should rejoice that 3 yak herders in Mongolia are taking Ruhi and parroting back perfectly what their tutor is telling them in the best tradition of *taqlid*.

I have quite a long ways to go to reach Counsellor Murphy's spiritual level. Maybe I should take Ruhi again.

How Do You Say "Baha'i" In Sign Language?

As far as I know, there is no official way to sign "Baha'i" in sign language.

Stephen Bedingfield offers the suggested sign – to the left – for the deaf and hard of hearing community to represent the word "Baha'i". If I'm blessed enough to have any readers from that community, I'd appreciate their input.

This reminds me of a story: One day I was dining at an outdoor cafe with a Baha'i friend when we were approached by a deaf person who simply placed a small, well-worn card on our table and walked away to do the same to the other tables.

When I picked it up I read that he was asking for money and explaining that he was deaf. When he returned to our table, my friend surprised him by speaking to him in sign language. At first he was shocked because she was not deaf but had by choice learned sign language.

I sat there transfixed for a few minutes as a dizzying array of finger and hand gestures flew in front of my face. I was curious what they were talking about but obviously had no way to know. After he had left my friend told me that she was trying to convince him to see himself as someone who could achieve more in life and not to accept that this was all he could be.

It didn't look like she convinced him but it did, once again, renew the question of whether Baha'is are allowed or supposed to give alms to needy persons.

According to the Baha'i Faith, begging and asceticism are forbidden. But can we help those in dire need? should we? We have the example of Abdu'l-Baha who regularly pressed coins into the hands of beggars. We also have Writings which make the Baha'i institutions, and especially the Universal House of Justice, responsible for the well-being of the poor, orphans and elderly.

> If ye meet the abased or the down-trodden, turn not away disdainfully from them, for the King of Glory ever watcheth over them and surroundeth them with such tenderness as none can fathom except them that have suffered their wishes and desires to be merged in the Will of your Lord, the Gracious, the All-Wise. O ye rich ones of the earth! Flee not from the face of the poor that lieth in the dust, nay rather befriend him and suffer him to recount the tale of the woes with which God's inscrutable Decree hath caused him to be afflicted. By the righteousness of God! Whilst ye consort with him, the Concourse on high will be looking upon you, will be interceding for you, will be extolling your names and glorifying your action.
> *Baha'u'llah*

There is also this Hidden Word:

> O MY SERVANT!
> The best of men are they that earn a livelihood by their calling and spend upon

> themselves and upon their kindred for the love of God, the Lord of all words.
> *Baha'u'llah*

What are you thoughts? Have you ever given money to a beggar? did you feel guilty as a Baha'i? or do you make it a policy to not give money to beggars?

How To Get Closer To God

This just might work:

sinfest-angel-close-to-god.png

cartoon credit: Sinfest.net

> **The Friend is nearer to me than my self**
> **But it is more strange that I am far from him**
> **What am I to do? To whom can it be said that he**
> **Is in my arms, but I am exiled from him**
> **-Sa'adi (*The Rose Garden – Gulistan*)**

Read a commentary by Baha'u'llah on this poem.

No related posts.

How to Get Elected to Baha'i Institutions

The dysfunction that I've witnessed in Baha'i institutions is both tragic and awe inspiring. Like many Baha'is I assumed that the institutions were there to help, protect and to serve the community. Had I not been witness to them, there was a point where I would simply not have believed the things that I saw. In the second stage, I grasped at the hope that the dysfunction was isolated to the lowest rung (LSAs) or to a geographic area. But soon, I saw that this was not so. I won't go into the details now because I've already talked about it a few times. Needless to say, there is something very wrong here. And it is hurting the Baha'i community severely. Yet we trundle along, managing to ignore it for the most part.

I often think about why things are as they are. Part of it is our propensity to not take cold hard looks at ourselves as a community to evaluate the results we are achieving. Part of it is the culture that prevents any and all feedback, especially if it is remotely negative. Such feedback is seen as criticism and an attack on the institutions – no matter that it be truthful and delivered with loving intentions.

Part of the problem is that the same people are elected to the same positions year after year. This causes a host of problems from feelings of entitlement, to rigid group think, to the creation of little fiefdoms. Part of the problem may be that we haven't been able to counter a social framework that has a bias for incompetent but loud members. I read this article in Times magazine and was immediately struck by how much of it reflected what was going on in the Baha'i institutions:

> "Dominant individuals behaved in ways that made them appear competent," the researchers write, "above and beyond their actual competence." Troublingly, group members seemed only too willing to follow these underqualified bosses.

The only way I can think of to counter these harmful built-in biases is to create a culture of transparency (something which is completely lacking in the Baha'i Faith right now), to create a sense of accountability, to institute term limits that would bring in new faces and ideas to the table, to ask the community to give feedback to the institutions and to respond to it adequately – even if it means admitting mistakes.

On the other hand, if you can't beat them, join them!

Michael Scott of *The Office*

How to Get Elected to Baha'i Institutions

Step 1

Wear nice clothes and be clean-cut.

Step 2

Attend every single Baha'i function and meeting. When you do, go around the room shaking hands and greet everyone by name. You should attend every single Ruhi book course – even if you've already taken it 4 times before.

Kick things into high gear when the new year rolls around. From January to April, you should be seen and heard by every single Baha'i in your community.

Step 3

Try to get on a high-profile committee that would give you as much public exposure as possible. Don't toil away in the background doing actual work where no one can see you. For example, become a tutor and then get on the institute board. Or get on the feast committee so you can get face time with the whole community.

Step 4

As you walk around, casually carry with you a well-worn Baha'i book at all times - *Creating a New Mind* is trendy. Or try a Ruhi book. If anyone asks you about it, look away wistfully and say you're re-reading it and every time you do, you get something new out of it.

Step 5

Speak up whenever there is a remote chance of an audience. Give mini-speeches, suggestions, pontificate or just ramble. Always have an opinion. And share it. It doesn't matter that it is completely wrong. Just be forceful and revel in your own ignorance.

Can't think of anything to say? Don't worry. Just memorize some Baha'i-speak. Blurt out that "we need to prioritize capacity building and share learnings to implement the framework for action so that our pyramid advances us into A-cluster status". It doesn't matter that what you just said makes no sense. All that matters is that you use the vocabulary of the International Teaching Center. And say it with confidence. In other words, channel Paul Lample.

If Infallible, Why Do We Need to Elect the UHJ?

You know, I'm really blessed to have such amazing participants here. Although I may not agree with everyone, I'm thankful that each one of you is here, contributing your thoughts and asking some fascinating questions.

Once in a while, a question or comment is so thought provoking that it merits more than a simple reply from me but an attempt, no matter how feeble, to give it the exposition it deserves. So for that purpose (as well as to give it a relevant thread of its own, as the original blog post was on another subject), here is the featured question…

"*Curious*" asked:

> My first question is why is there a need to go through an election for UHJ members if the complete Baha'i congregation is not suppose to question the UHJ decisions? In other words, if everyone is meant to assume that everything the UHJ does is absolutely correct, what is the logic in reelecting the members. Wouldn't it just be obvious that the same members are kept in all the time? Shouldn't the election just be for the case when a position opens on the UHJ? So why do the Writings call for elections?

After receiving a non-answer, *Curious* tried again:

> I understand the UHJ members get old and tired and resign. That leaves a vacancy which I understand needs an election to fill. My question is why the need to reelect every 5 years (I believe)? If these 9 men are infallible on a collective level in their arbitration, why do they need to be reexamined via election? How does this create stability? It seems very time consuming and costly. And in the end aren't they usually reelected anyway? So why did the Master and Guardian call for reelection? What is the true purpose?

Before I try to answer this question, let me say that the Baha'i community is starved today for such thinking and such questioning. We need less and less Baha'i Ruhi-style, spoonfed

"answers" and more thought expanding questions. Compare and contrast the 1970's LA Class' penchant for questions and Ruhi's fetish for "answers". Sigh.

For Pete's sake! As Baha'is we have a whole month named after them… but how often do we really devote time and mental space to explore really good questions? Not enough. This is the biggest mistake that Baha'is make.

Now to attempt an answer. First, the Universal House of Justice is infallible, only under certain conditions. For example, we have guidance from Abdu'l-Baha regarding means by which the UHJ should come about and function. If those conditions and prerequisites are discarded, that is, if the process isn't followed, then the result lacks the intended meaning.

Second, I don't believe in the infallibility that you don't believe in. By that I mean that probably the second biggest mistake that Baha'is make is to misunderstand the meaning of infallibility. This, no doubt, stems from the first mistake – for had they actually questioned and investigated, they would most assuredly find the truth. In actuality, "infallibility" does not mean "factual inerrancy". Anyone who attempts to argue otherwise is not only ignoring simple logic but the Baha'i Writings themselves.

For a tongue-in-cheek *reductio ad absurdum* exposition see: Magic 8 Ball or a dart board for "infallible" decision making. But *Curious*' question takes things to another level by asking, if this body is "infallible" then why hold elections? Brilliant.

The reason why *Curious*' question is so useful is that if we are to attempt a real answer, it pulls away the superficial assumptions that we may have and forces us to really try to understand what is at the heart of the Baha'i Administration.

Yes, it is true that the UHJ membership for the vast majority, has been a life-long affair. At one point members were not even allowed to resign due to health or age but actually served until death. That has thankfully changed and we recently saw two members resign to enter retirement. However, this brings us to another issue. That the membership of the UHJ has come from a narrow subset of the Baha'i community. Even more damaging, this subset is itself appointed by the UHJ. So in effect we have the UHJ choosing candidates by appointing them to the ITC and then these (male) members of the ITC are elected to replace retiring UHJ members. This closed system is an accurate description of the current state of the Baha'i leadership but it doesn't mean that it was meant to be this way, nor that this is ideal.

In fact, most recognize that this is detrimental to the well-being of the worldwide Baha'i community. For the past 20 or so years we are witness to an ossification at the highest levels. But who do we have to blame? Ourselves. We are the ones that elect the same members of the LSA over and over again. We are the ones that send the same Baha'is, year in, year out, to be delegates. Furthermore, this is clearly not what Abdu'l-Baha intended since the appointed arm and the elected arm of the BA were delineated in duty and responsibility, as well as authority, with no overlap whatsoever.

Finally, to return to some semblance of brevity: the Baha'i Writings call for regular elections because the purpose of the UHJ is the highest in the world – that of servitude.

Related Previous Discussions:
The Concept of Infallibility in the Baha'i Faith
Is the Universal House of Justice Infallible? (Part I)
Is the Universal House of Justice Infallible? (Part II)
Individual Conscience Within the Baha'i Faith
Meditations on Baha'u'llah: Infallibility 1
Meditations on Baha'u'llah: Infallibility 2
Meditations on Baha'u'llah: Infallibility 3
He cannot override…
Commentary on the Divine Unity

Incomplete File

To my readership, the following may be "preaching to the choir" but since the author is a unique individual, it merits wider circulation.

Below is an excerpt from an article written by Ahmad Batebi. The translation is by our very own Ahang Rabbani.

"From the first hours of 27 July 2008, the results of the nationwide university entrance examination were available on the official website of the National Organization for Educational Assessment.

However, after entering their personal data on the registration website, most of the Bahai applicants were confronted with the strange system response, "incomplete file". At present there are no exact statistics on how many Baha'i applicants have been rejected on the base of "incomplete file"; in light of the imprisonment of the leaders of the Baha'i community in Iran, perhaps such statistics will never become available through official means.

However, "incomplete file" is the most perplexing response to student applicants in place of an actual diploma. This is because if the file of a student is indeed missing some important piece of information such that that he is disqualified from receiving a diploma, then according to the regulations of the Organization for Assessment that student is disbarred from participation in the national examination, and under no circumstances would a permit card be issued for him to attend such an entrance exam.

Article 30 of the Islamic Republic's constitution requires the government to provide all citizens with free education up to secondary school, and to expand free higher education to the extent required by the country for attaining self-sufficiency.

However, after the Islamic Revolution we have persistently witnessed that nearly all Bahai students have been expelled from Iran's institutions of higher learning because of their religion, and none were permitted to attend universities."

Read the complete article here…

> "I wish each and every Iranian could travel abroad, come to the U.S. or go to Europe, for just one week, and feel, smell, and breathe freedom, human dignity, and realize the value of their lives."

I echo Batebi's wishes, especially for my fellow Baha'is. Leave the despotic, decaying ruin that is present day Iran. A whole world awaits you.

Here is Batebi talking with the BBC about his time in jail and his escape:

No related posts.

Individual Baha'is Ignoring NSA Directive on Iran

Daniela recently wrote a guest post about the 'official' Baha'i guidance regarding the protest movement in Iran: Don't Speak Out for Them. There she quoted the UK NSA's guidance to Baha'is to keep mum about the developments in Iran.

I already linked to a similar message from the NSA of the USA. To summarize:

> "the believers should be guided lovingly and firmly to distance themselves from either public or private commentary".

And there are similar letters from all NSA's around the world. Which means that this is a coordinated effort from the UHJ/ITC but for some reason it was deemed more prudent for the individual NSA's to write similar letters rather than just one from Haifa.

In any case, it seems that Baha'is are ignoring such directives.

twitter is a new social networking site that allows people to 'tweet' 140 characters (or less) messages from their phones, computers, etc. It gained even more prominence during the first days of the Iranian post-election uprising as youth in Iran would send messages, often from the streets, to the rest of the world. With the harsh crackdown on foreign reporters, the youth became in effect the eyes and ears on the ground.

There are relatively few Iranians using twitter. The vast majority of the users are in the US and through the hashtag #iranelection they have been following the reports coming out of Iran and elsewhere. As a gesture of solidarity in the first days of the movement, many changed their account icons to full green or to the text "Where's my vote?"

Then someone set up a site which would add a green overlay to the existing account icon and thousands showed their support in this way.

Not surprisingly, Iranian Baha'is have been one of the active sub-groups in following the recent developments in Iran. They are still connected if not by an emotional bond, by family and friends who are still there and are feeding them news. Many of them on facebook and twitter have added a green overlay to their account icons. Among the most prominent is Rainn Wilson. Click the image below to see a recent screenshot of Rainn's twitter account:

So while the NSA's around the world are telling Baha'is to keep mum about the Iranian protest, it seems that at least through electronic means, individual Baha'is are largely ignoring this and continuing to be engaged in following and supporting the values that the Baha'is Faith stands for: equality, freedom, justice, separation of church and state, etc. Such values are hallowed above all and any political considerations and to cower in a corner, rather than stand up and defend them is to be ignorant of the very essence of our Faith.

Of couse, we have no problem advocating on their behalf when the downtrodden happen to be Baha'is. No. Not at all. We are asked to contact our government, speak with influential people, take our case to the UN, etc. to draw attention to the injustices heaped on Baha'is. But when Baha'is are not directly involved? Then we are told to STFU.

Turning your icon green may seem to be an infinitesimal gesture when compared to the actions of the youth of Iran right now who are facing beatings, arrest, torture and ultimately death but as spectators thousands of miles away from Iran it helps us as much as them to do *something*.

Finally, to characterize the protests that have taken place inside and outside Iran as 'clearly partisan activity' is to demonstrate utter ignorance. The will of a nation yearning to live free is as distanced from partisan politics as the Baha'is right to live without persecution. I understand that the only tool at the disposal of the NSAs is to characterize the peaceful protests as 'partisan' in order to persuade Baha'is to not support them. But mislabeling something so blatantly only damages the integrity of the said national bodies.

We must choose to side with our values and if they perchance make us allies with one or more political factions at any point in time, this is merely coincidence. Such seeming partnership is no reason to abandon one's values and ignore them in the fear of appearing to be supporting 'partisan politics'. This was the mistake that we made in South Africa during Apartheid when we stood aside while all the values we cherish as Baha'is were trampled.

How is it that we have no reluctance to approach differing political parties in power to lobby on behalf of the persecuted Baha'i minority in Iran? By what magical device is such activity and partnership not deemed to be 'partisan'? How different is it to supporting any other group that is persecuted and has their rights removed?

Here is a letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Iranian Baha'is regarding the recent events.

Individual Conscience Within the Baha'i Faith

Although this blog is a personal endeavor, I am blessed with the company of many friends who share with me their thoughts and opinions. Within a previous discussion, there was a comment about the sacredness of individual conscience and how it relates to the Baha'i Faith.

There are those who hold this opinion:

> "We have inherited a dangerous delusion from Christianity that our individual conscience is supreme. This is not a Baha'i belief. In the end, in the context of both our role in the community and our role in the greater world, we must be prepared to sacrifice our personal convictions or opinions. The belief that individual conscience is supreme is equivalent to "taking partners with God' which is abhorrent to the Teachings of the Faith."
> Douglas Martin (former member of the Universal House of Justice)

I'm not sure I would word it as "supreme" but yes, individual conscience is pretty darned important. It is, after all, what guides people to find the Baha'i Faith (or whatever spiritual path they choose). It is what guides our daily lives, our daily actions. And what allows us to, however imperfectly, implement this injunction:

> Bring thyself to account each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning; for death, unheralded, shall come upon thee and thou shalt be called to give account for thy deeds.
> *Baha'u'llah* (Arabic Hidden Words #31)

Regarding individual conscience, last night I read this quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

> "Moreover, if interrogation of conscience, which is one of the private possessions of the heart and soul, take place in this world, what further recompense remains for man in the court of justice at the day of general resurrection? Convictions and ideas are within the scope of the comprehension of the King of kings, not of kings."
> *Maqalih-Shaks-i Sayyah*
> Provisional translation from Prof. Juan Cole

The context of this is religious freedom within society. Abdu'l-Baha is saying that civil government has no say when it comes to religious matters. Yes, the Baha'i Faith believes in separation of church and state. But since the argument is that religious "convictions and ideas" can only be judged by God, it leads me to believe that they are basically outside the purview of all earthly institutions.

Unfortunately, not everyone has internalized this. Especially the appointed arm of Baha'i institutions which are given the responsability of "protection" of the Faith. They mistakenly believe this to mean they have *carte blanche* to interrogate fellow Baha'is and bully them.

So the question then is, what happens when the innate and noble faculty of conscience finds itself in conflict with a decision or path taken by an organization or society? Does one simply sacrifice their conscience and fall in line? Or does one pursue it and try to change society.

Often the example of “terrorists” or “genocidal maniacs” are brought up. Should we allow them freedom to do what their conscience dictates? That would make no sense!

It would perhaps be useful to look at what Baha’is do in societies which are openly hostile to them and their beliefs. Or perhaps at the examples of Christ, the Bab, Baha’u’llah or Abdu’l-Baha when faced with threats, prosecution and potential violence?

The key for me is to ask: Is “it” in accord with the unchanging principles and laws of God?

I think this is what the UHJ is trying to say:

> “A Baha'is recognizes that one aspect of his spiritual and intellectual growth is to foster the development of his conscience in the light of divine Revelation — a Revelation which, in addition to providing a wealth of spiritual and ethical principles, exhorts man ‘to free himself from idle fancy and imitation, discern with the eye of oneness His glorious handiwork, and look into all things with a searching eye’. This process of development, therefore, involves a clear-sighted examination of the conditions of the world with both heart and mind. A Baha'is will understand that an upright life is based upon observance of certain principles which stem from Divine Revelation and which he recognizes as essential for the well-being of both the individual and society.”
> *Document: Issues Related to the Study of the Baha'is Faith*

So if push comes to shove, I would say that observing divine precepts is supreme. What are they? Unity, love, fellowship and compassion. You will find these in every single religion. They have been and are, constant, and will remain so.

That is what will protect society from genocidal maniacs who may claim they are simply following the dictates of their conscience. While they may be sincere (or simply crazy), because they are in direct conflict with the spirit of the age, it can not be used as an excuse to act in ways which are contrary to the wellbeing of themselves and others.

Individual conscience is sacred because it is divinely inspired. The distinction is then whether a decision or action is in accord with divine principles or not. If it isn't, we can not simply "submit" our conscience to the "decision of the majority" when that is, far too often, a euphemism for injustice. Abdu'l-Baha never did.

Finally, when conscience is allied with the Word of God and His principles, it is supreme by the very fact that its ally is Supreme. This ties into what Baha'u'llah said regarding infallibility. And perhaps what Rumi meant when he said: "A'nal-haq" (I am God). It is not "partnership with God" but rather total and utter annihilation within Him.

Informational Asymmetries

Something that economists love to analyze and play around with are informational asymmetries. They want to know everything about them. What gave rise to them, how they are maintained, how it affects markets and decision making, etc. You yourself have tonnes of experience with informational asymmetry. Well, you do but probably didn't call it that. I mean not being an economist you probably have better things to do than go around labelling things with funny names.Remember that time you wanted to buy a car? Yup, that was informational asymmetry. What about that time you were set up with that disasterous blind date? Yes, that too. And what about the time you went to the dentist to get your wisdom teeth pulled? Yes, you guessed it. That was informational asymmetry also.So what is it exactly? It's any situation where everyone involved doesn't have the same quantity and quality of relevant information. Two guys even wrote a rather boring (unless you are into economic and econometrics) paper on this and got a Nobel prize for their trouble. Go figure.So when you went to buy a car, the dealer knew exactly how much it cost her and

exactly how much she would be making. She also knew some other things like that a colleague of hers in a nearby city was selling the same make and model for $1000 less. But those things, as you can understand, she chose to convey to you only through the unspoken action of smiling in your direction.

In the blind date, you knew in the first few seconds that things were not going to work out because of your date's bad manners or bad breath (or both). But the other person necessarily didn't know this. They are even now totally confused why you didn't call back.

And the dentist? When he recommended that you needed to pull out your wisdom teeth he probably didn't mention that you really didn't because there was a very good chance your jaw could accomodate the new arrivals. You, of course, didn't know this as you weren't the one who studied dentristry.

But what does this have to do with the Baha'i Faith? Well, a lot it seems. The more I think about informational asymmetry, the more I see it as something plaguing the Baha'i community today. Let me run through some things which are real challenges within the Faith right now and you'll see that they are totally related to this phenomena.

PRE-PUBLICATION REVIEW: Any noetic work from a Baha'i must go before a 'review board' before it is published, or otherwise made available to the public. This process was enacted by Abdu'l-Baha and continued by Shoghi Effendi. Its noteworthy that they both maintained that it was a temporary measure. Today it is simply an anachronism. But then again there simply is no better way to create informational asymmetries and assure they are maintained than to simply filter the creation and dissemination of ideas.

MANAGEMENT OF BAHA'I FUNDS: This is a rather strange example because asymmetry seems to increase the higher you go up. The vast majority of local communities are very transparent when it comes to the Baha'i funds. Reports are made on time and are available at Feast. And if you miss Feast, your friendly neighborhood Treasurer can clue you in easily. As you go up to the National level, it gets a bit murky. Reports aren't available on time (I guess it takes time to prepare it) and they are vague. What's more, it is a very rare to spot a balance sheet anywhere. All you get are stale and vague numbers for the income statement. Going further up – where worldwide decisions are made – you get pitch black. The cloak of secrecy at the UHJ/ITC is simply not penetrated. Ever. No

financial statements (either balance sheet or income statements) are ever released and any queries are returned either totally unanswered or with a vague and general response which is devoid of any significance.

FILES ON INDIVIDUALS: Most Baha'is don't have a clue that the UHJ/ITC forces Counsellors, ABMs and Assistants to ABMs to create and maintain files on individual Baha'is. To me this is very creepy and KGB like for any organization, nevermind a religion which espouses the lofty ideals of the Baha'i Faith. But however unsavory, this practice finds a place on this list because Baha'is are not informed that there is a 'file' on them and two, they are not informed as to the contents of that 'file'. Coupled with the lack of due process, this guarantees that any mistakes, lies, misrepresentations, half-truths, exaggerations are not corrected; thereby increasing informational asymmetry.

ADMINISTRATIVE SECRECY: I would be the first to insist that there are many things that pass by an assembly meeting which should be kept strictly confidential and yes, totally secret. Common sense tells me that matters involving personal and intimate details of an individual's life – such as marriage, divorce, disputes, etc. – should be kept confidential. However, I'm uneasy when a blanket confidentiality is extended to all matters discussed in an assembly and no minutes are released (even filtered to remove the personal information I mentioned above and time delayed). I believe it is the right and responsability of everyone in the community to know that which affects them collectively and to be involved. Being shut out only increases informational asymmetry.

RESEARCH & SOURCE MATERIAL: There are literally thousands of documents in the Baha'i Archives in Haifa (as well as the Afnan Library in the UK and the US Archives and elsewhere) that are kept behind lock and key. Only those scholars vetted by the UHJ/ITC (basically those that agree to all its policies and have never objected to anything they have every written or said) are allowed access to them. Usually the red herring is trotted out that the Baha'i World Centre needs time to translate them into English. Although I don't doubt this, it doesn't mean that they can't scan them and put them up on the web so that all scholars have access to such valuable documents. Why is the BWC acting like a cantankerous Amish farmer, if not to create and maintain informational asymmetry?

LACK OF DUE PROCESS: There are tonnes of examples here. Where to begin? I'll use Alison's expulsion, as a convenient example. Even after so many years, it still remains a

mystery why she was expelled. The UHJ/ITC has not communicated to her, the NSA of NZ or to anyone else the reason(s) why she was treated as she was. Oh sure, there has been much speculation by many but we simply don't know why the UHJ/ITC made the decision. That's because there was and is a complete lack of due process. Due process is of course one of the mortal enemies of informational asymmetry.

Along with this example, we can consider the generally vague and imprecise manner in which the Administration communicates with Baha'is. Either no information is provided or if any if forthcoming, it is vague and devoid of any precise meaning. As an example, consider that when the LA class met with Nelson (a member of the NSA of the US) they asked him why the NSA was levelling charges of 'partisanship' against them. They asked him to back up this allegation. All they received from Nelson was that the terms used by the NSA would become 'clear upon reflection'. This is a very clever way of creating informational asymmetry because the person is acting coyishly like 'an expert' and the onus is shifted on to the questioner. It isn't the job of the 'expert' to provide an answer, the questioner must reflect and find it themselves.

CENSORSHIP: Here I'm referring to the closing down of informal discussion venues and medium (as opposed to individual works such as papers and books which is covered by the 'pre-publication review'). Obvious examples are: Dialogue, Talisman (I) and the LA class of the 70's and early 80's. As well as the concerted effort to block the creation of talk.religion.bahai (in order to keep Baha'i discussions on Usenet under the heavyhanded moderation of soc.religion.bahai). Another example is the monopolistic control over national Baha'i magazines. These monthly publications, which are strictly steered by the respective NSAs, only publish saccharine articles rather than reflecting the reality most Baha'is experience. In short there is no 'freedom of the press'. Except for the internet. But I estimate that less than 1% of Baha'is uses this medium (either because they have been scared off by the AO and/or because they simply don't have access to it).

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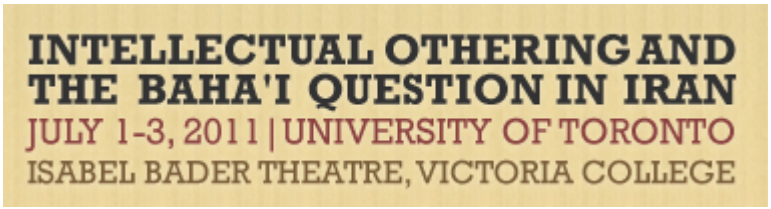
Looking through that list above its rather obvious that one common thread runs through them all. They all are either creating or perpetuating informational asymmetry. And if you know anything about informational asymmetry, then you know that that is not a good thing.

No related posts.

Intellectual Othering & the Baha'i Question in Iran

The University of Toronto, in conjunction with the Foundation for Iranian Studies and the Toronto Initiative for Iranian Studies, is sponsoring a conference about the Baha'is in Iran.


INTELLECTUAL OTHERING AND
THE BAHA'I QUESTION IN IRAN
JULY 1-3, 2011 | UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
ISABEL BADER THEATRE, VICTORIA COLLEGE

The conference will take place July 1-3rd 2011 and offer an array of speakers, many of which should be familiar already to the readers of this blog: Abbas Amanat, Moojan Momen, Payam Akhavan, Muhammad Afnan, etc.

Here is the synopsis of the conference's topic:

> As a genuinely Iranian intellectual and religious movement emerging in the mid-nineteenth century, the Baha'i Faith has encountered relentless and sustained repression and scapegoating in the country of its origin. Exploring various aspects of the Baha'i Question in Iran over the past century and a half, the scholars participating in this international conference will critically reflect on a wide range of issues related to the similarities and differences of Shi'i Islam and Baha'i Faith, the role of Baha'is in Iranian cultural and intellectual life, and the fact of their continued repression and intellectual Othering.

Since a prominent Baha'i blogger will be attending, hopefully we can read about the experience soon after the conference. If you're in the Toronto area or can travel and are interested to attend, the cost is minimal ($100 Canadian) – Registration.

The event's facebook page also contains more information, including many videos of the upcoming presenter's past speeches and related research.

UPDATE: You can view the videos of the conference presentations here, both in translated English as well as the original Persian.

Introduction

I'm a Baha'i (in good standing) who is nonetheless disillusioned with the current state of the Baha'i world community. My aim is not to persuade or convince anyone of any conclusion. I simply hope that by voicing these thoughts, I can come to grips with the spiritual challenges that I am wrestling with personally. This is a most selfish endeavor and you are free to disagree with me. In fact, I welcome differences of opinion, for without them, it would be difficult to arrive at the truth.

So first things first, what do I believe and what are my values?

First and foremost, I believe in God as the Creator, the Unknowable Essence, and the Architect of the universe; in Baha'u'llah, as God's Manifestation for this age; in the legislative authority of the Universal House of Justice and in the institution of the Guardianship (last held by Shoghi Effendi).

Furthermore, I value **unity in diversity**, not conformity, nor uniformity. Sadly, in today's Baha'i community anyone who voices an opinion that does not agree with that of the majority or the administration, is looked at suspiciously. Somehow, the mistaken idea that unity must equal conformity has gripped the Baha'i community and as a result, a sterile group think has replaced the vibrant, and dynamic exchange of clashing viewpoints.

I value **decentralization, over centralization**. Central planning and its proponents, assume that life is static, linear and mechanistic; that it can be categorized, numbered and therefore, understood and controlled. However, life is not like that. It is messy, chaotic and dynamic. Unfortunately, the now widely discarded 19th-century ideal of centralization permeates the Baha'i community. Nowhere is it better seen than in grandiose multi-year plans. These plans are largely ignored by the community because they are imposed top-down and therefore, fail to motivate individuals. Yet they keep coming. Another example of centralization in the current Baha'i community is the funneling of donations from localities to the World Centre where they are expended without any disclosure or explanation – in contrast these funds could be used at the level where they are generated to build better communities.

Related to the previous issue, I believe in the empowerment of the individual to take **personal and independent initiative**. There are uncountable potentialities within each and everyone of us. Baha'u'llah describes man as a mine rich in gems; the way to mine these riches is to empower the individual to go forward to do what their soul inspires them. Like a young child, they will stumble, and make mistakes, but that is the only way to grow and develop. Despite the mentions of this value in communiques from the UHJ, its opposite rules the community and impedes personal initiative. Most individual Baha'is are loath to start any service project or act on any idea, unless it is first reviewed and sanctioned by their LSA or NSA.

Among the spiritual instincts latent within everyone of us, the drive for knowledge, is perhaps the strongest. This is why I believe in scholarship and the **unfettered investigation of truth**. Sadly, many documents related to the Faith and its history as well as volumes and volumes of the Writings of Baha'u'llah and the Bab have not yet been translated or released publicly . Although translation of these documents may take time, there is no reason why scanned versions of them can not be made available to all through the internet. Why are we so behind the others in this regard? By controlling or limiting access to what is in essence, the heritage and right of humanity, not only is scholarship hamstrung, but all of mankind suffers.

Closely intertwined with the search for knowledge is the **free expression of our perception** of it. I believe that the practice of 'review' where the product of individual Baha'i's talents and intelligence is filtered and in many instances censored, is in direct violation of justice. This temporary measure, enacted by Abdu'l-Baha as a way to protect the Faith in a time of confusion, has been extended to an age where information is readily available and its instantaneous exchange made possible by technology. The case for maintaining this anachronism is made by some that it serves to protect the Faith from misunderstandings by both Baha'is and non-Baha'is. This paternalistic attitude however, disregards the fact that both groups are perfectly able to shoulder their God given responsibility to investigate the truth. As well, the non-Baha'i world is also capable of distinguishing from the words and actions of individual Baha'is, imperfect as they may be, and the Baha'i Faith itself. They do this everyday with regards to other religions and their adherents.

Too much emphasis is place on quantification in the Baha'i community to the detriment of the qualitative aspects of the community, such as vibrancy, unity, diversity, happiness and maturity. A tremendous amount of energy within the Baha'i community is wasted to collect, analyse and disseminate a huge pile of numbers for: enrollments, travelling teachers, pioneers, Ruhi course participants, cluster numbers and levels, and figures for the various Baha'i funds. Yet, qualitative aspects not only matter more in the lives of individuals and communities alike, they are prerequisites for numerical growth and achievement.

I value the **administration as a tool rather than as a substitute** for the Faith. Unfortunately, it has substituted the mystical and spiritual life of communities with mundane, bureaucratic, paper-pushing. This may be a result of ignoring the repeated mentions and entreaties, in the Writings, to establish the institution of the Mashriqul'Adhkar in all localities.

Also troubling for me is the confusion surrounding the **recognition of the station and authority of the twin institutions** of the administrative order: the UHJ and the Guardianship. Too many Baha'is believe that the UHJ is "God on earth", "God's representative" or some other such nonsense. Usually, these same people also mistakenly believe that every word uttered by Shoghi Effendi and his secretaries is Baha'i law. This is perhaps one of the most damaging mistakes because it touches on so many aspects of our community. I believe deepening on the meaning and significance of infallibility – in the context of the language and culture that it was used – would go towards removing this confusion and its negative effects.

I believe in an **open and transparent due process**; secrecy and justice can not coexist side by side. This point has been demonstrated repeatedly through human history and needs no further arguments. I sincerely hope that the voices within the administration which advocate opacity (however it is excused) will remember that justice is the best beloved in His sight.

I am aware that such views and their open expression in a public forum, is not in keeping with current Baha'i culture. As Baha'is, we are asked to share our concerns, criticisms and feedback directly with the institutions of the Faith. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be working. It is a most human need to want to be heard and acknowledged. When Baha'is, like myself, do not feel that the institutions fulfill this need, they reluctantly seek other

channels. This is not motivated by malice, but by extreme frustration and a hunger for justice.

Iranian Baha'is on Trial: Quick Update

It is easy to forget that we are closing in on almost 2 years of incarceration for the 7 members of the national administrative body of the Baha'is of Iran. In Persian, the body is known as the Yaran (or Friends):

Since their arrest, they have been in legal limbo. The Iranian authorities are pressured on one side to present and argue a case so that they can be found guilty but on the other hand the international community and NGOs like Amnesty International are demanding a fair and open trial.

The result has been a bureaucratic gridlock that has produced and ignored countless trial dates. I wouldn't be surprised if this was the strategy adopted by the Iranian regime. After all, if the IRI can basically detain prisoners indefinitely without really bringing any charges or afford them the opportunity to defend themselves in a transparent court of law, they've more or less accomplished their goal.

Now it seems the strategy has shifted after almost two years. On April 12th the IRI finally went ahead with a trial. Here is an official update from the Baha'i International Community:

> Two members of the legal team, Mrs. Mahnaz Parakand and Mr. Hadi Ismailzadeh, were able to be present at the session. Their two other colleagues, Mrs. Shirin Ebadi and Mr. Abolfattah Soltani, were unable to attend.
>
> The hearing was scheduled to begin at 9:30 AM, yet notwithstanding that the lawyers were present at precisely the specified time, the session commenced only two and a half hours later. The families of the defendants were not permitted entry to the proceedings, which clearly signaled that the session was to be closed. However, numerous officials and interrogators from the Ministry of Intelligence were present, including a film crew whose cameras were positioned in the courtroom, which understandably gave rise to questions and concerns about the intentions behind the presence of such individuals in a closed hearing.
>
> In view of the foregoing circumstances, the prisoners, with the full agreement of their attorneys, indicated to the judge that they declined to be party to the proceedings. The judge then adjourned the session. No date was announced for the next hearing.

So the gridlock continues. But the IRI can now claim a victory on the grounds that they were ready to move forward but their attempt was rejected by the Baha'is.

I'm not sure why exactly the Baha'is decided to not to proceed. Having government officials (interrogators, intelligence, etc.) included in the proceedings is part and parcel for the IRI's case so it is natural that they would be included.

As well, what is wrong with having a camera record the proceedings? It is actually a step in the right direction, isn't it? And how else would you be able to record the proceedings unless you have staff manning the audio/visuals? And why do they believe that this was a closed hearing if there was no actual ruling on this?

I'm not an Iranian or international legal expert but simply excluding family members (who are unrelated to the case) isn't necessarily out of order nor unheard of. As long as the

defendants have proper representation and are able to call witnesses, present evidence, etc. why would having their families there and not being filmed be so crucial that they would "walk out"?

Maybe I'm missing something but the strategy of the Baha'is and their lawyers is baffling and ultimately may end up hurting them.

Iranian Baha'is letter to IRI

The website www.iranian.com is a pretty neutral place where Iranians of all persuasions (political, religous, etc.) come and exchange ideas. iranian.com does care about human rights and under this concern have previously published articles about the Faith in Iran. Recently it posted a letter addressed to the IRI which is purported to be written by the Baha'i community in Iran. I'm not sure though if this was leaked to them by the Baha'is in Iran, or the IRI which received it, or whether it is simply a fake.The introductory section in English states:

> This is the first time the Bahai community inside Iran has written an open letter to the government of the Islamic Republic seeking an end to human rights abuses. For this fact alone, it is of great historical importance.

If not a hoax, this is indeed a very rare document because in it, the Baha'i community addresses the government of Iran openly. It must have been done either through consultation with or from the orders of the UHJ.

To me this is yet another letter in the trend that was started recently by the UHJ in addressing Iran, the country, its present government and the Baha'is there as well as their relationship with Baha'is elsewhere. For some reason their attention is really drawn to Iran right now. Perhaps they sense a change coming and are positioning the community for it. Who knows.

In recent years the IRI's stance on Baha'is and their rights has been downright civilized compared to the post revolutionary fanaticism which wreaked havoc on the lives of so many innocent men, women and children. Nowadays, Baha'is are basically free to live their lives and are able to hold feast and meetings, have non-Baha'i friends, socialize,

marry, divorce, have children, gain employment, even openly mention that they are Baha'is. The only thing which is still a no-no is teaching the Faith or any such behaviour which would call attention to oneself as a Baha'i (such as breaking the law). So, I wonder, what is the aim of this letter?

I know there obviously could be improvements in the way Baha'is are treated in Iran (and in other Muslim countries) but one can only realistically expect so much under such a harsh theocratic regime as the IRI. So what possible positive consequences can they expect from such a public display?

As I understand it, the letter is addressed to Khatami in his capacity as president of the IRI. But everyone knows that he is not the person who holds the power in the government. That person is Khamenei and the Guardian Council, which he himself appoints. It is this authority which commands the hooligans on the street which harrass people for infractions of their version of Sharia law and which allows judges to be harshest and most unforgiving to Baha'is brought before their benches. But even if we assume that Khatami is somehow imbued with the authority to implement the changes requested in the letter, there is simply no time as Iran is gearing up for the election of a new president in 6 months.

More importantly, I'm still waiting for confirmation that this letter is real, and for a translation to English. I must point out that since this letter's existence has not been reported within the official Baha'i communication channels, it is quite possibly a hoax.

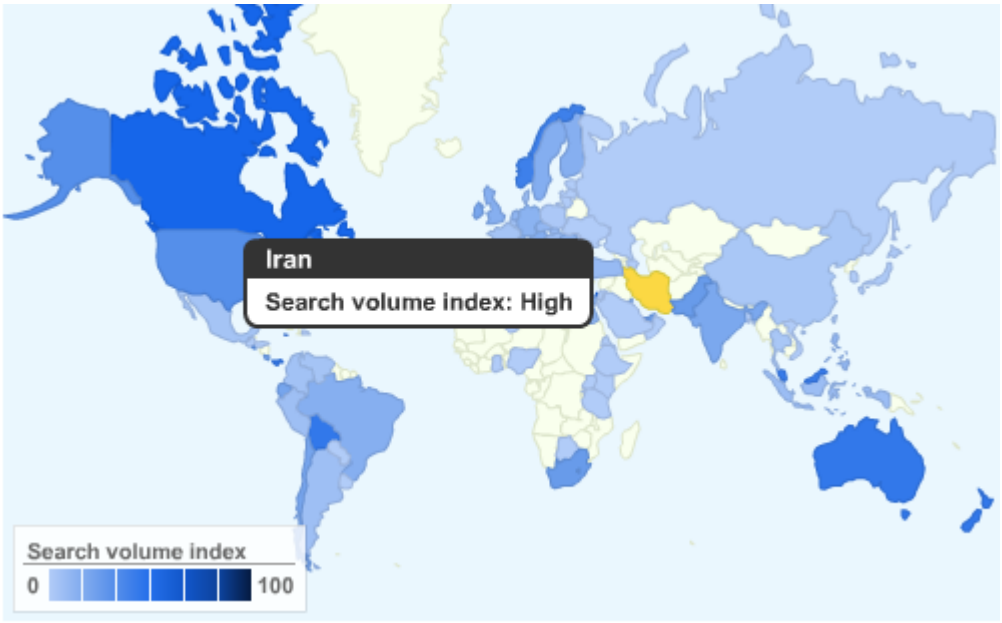
It turned out the letter was real.

Iranians Curious About "Bahai", Americans Not

Google, being the most widely used search engine, collects an unbelievably large amount of data about how we use the internet and what we search for. Since their motto is "Don't be evil" they are rather transparent and open up a lot of this data, offering an intriguing view into what people around the world are curious about.

According to Google, a lot of folks are interested to learn more about the Baha'i Faith on the internet. The keyword "bahai" ranks at around 80, which is relatively high (out of 100). The trend over the past 4 years is moderately decreasing however.

Google also breaks down the search volume for keywords by geography. Perhaps you would be surprised to learn that, by far, the most curious, are Iranians:



According to Google, Iran's search volume for the keyword Baha' is 100 (the highest). I'm amazed to see such unbridled curiosity from the cradle of the Faith. Not just because I tend to read from most parts that people there are generally apathetic but also because of the technological limitations imposed by a nationwide firewall which rivals China's.

If you drill down into the Iranian data, you discover that there has been a dramatic drop off in search volume for Baha'i in the past 4 years. It has gone from 100 to low double digits. Maybe that's when the firewall went into effect. Or perhaps it was ratcheted up.

Understandably, the second spot goes to Israel, at a respectable 67. I don't know about you, but I would be a tiny bit interested to learn more about this "Baha'i" thing if I had scores of Baha'is in my backyard every year.

Unfortunately for the proclamation efforts of the NSA of the United States, Americans are apathetic at an index reading of just 39. However, the people in the state of Illinois, for some strange reason, show the highest interest. Followed very closely by Alaska.

Another country scraping the bottom of the barrel in terms of interest is Chile. Hopefully once the Santiago Temple is finished, that will change things.

If you want to tinker with the data, here is the link for the Google Insight worldwide, and Iran specific search data.

Iran's Future

It has become a favourite pastime of those interested in the political situation in Iran to engage in guessing when the Islamic Republic of Iran will lose power and cease to exist. At every mention of demonstrations and student rallies in the news, people are breathless with anticipation that this could be "it". Each time of course they are disappointing as the demonstrations fizzle out or the rallies are brutally crushed. And so, the waiting game continues.I must admit that the future of Iran is important to Baha'is for more than simply patriotic reasons. We look at Iran as the Cradle of the Faith; where much of the early Babi and Baha'i history played out; where thousands and thousands of Babi and Baha'i martyrs shed their blood and where there are many locations and buildings which we consider sacred and holy. In fact, one of the two pilgrimage sites for Baha'is is in Iran (the house of the Bab in Shiraz – the other site being the house of Baha'u'llah in Baghdad). So it is fair to say that Baha'is may even have a little more vested interest in the future of Iran than the average Iranian.
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The first rays of hope for Iranians wishing for a more open and egalitarian society came with the election of Khatami about 8 years ago. He was brought to power through the devotion of students and women, who believed that he would champion their causes. After two terms, it is clear that he was unable or unwilling to do so. Although there have been some positive changes, it is difficult to credit Khatami. Rather, they have come from the incessant and inevitable seeping of Western cultures (through the modern technologies of satellite tv and internet) and the realization of those who in reality hold power, that it serves their best interest to relax, ever so slightly, the choke-hold of religious restrictions. Recently, the students have become so disillusioned with Khatami that they have changed tactics.

Corresponding with this same new era of relaxed moral and religious codes, the Baha'is of Iran, also saw a dramatic reduction in the level and severity of religious persecution. They began to enjoy freedoms which were once but a dream of a bygone era; they were allowed to go to school, hold meetings, have marriages and births recognized, etc. However, these freedoms are strictly on an individual and case by case basis. As long as individual Baha'is did not and do not call undue attention to themselves, they are pretty much left alone to live their lives. Needless to say, the Baha'i Faith and community as a whole are still considered a pariah and the Iranian government's policy of exterminating the Baha'is (both inside and outside Iran) has not changed at all. The Iranian government has realized, however, that it can not put this plan into action without severe international consequences. In fact, thankfully, we have not had a Baha'i martyred in some time now.

Instead religious persecution has been concentrated on the community as a whole, rather than on specific individuals. Recent examples, are the desecration of the resting place of Quddus, the destruction house of Baha'u'llah's father, Mirza Buzurg-i-Nuri and the desecration of a Baha'i cemetery in Yazd. When I wrote about the situation of the Baha'is of Iran in a previous post, I was roundly criticized for not mentioning these events and not considering them relevant.

The fact is they are relevant and yes, they are persecutions. But they are of a different form. They harm all of the Baha'i Faith and its member communities all around the world, collectively. By losing such cherished and sacred holy spots as mentioned above, we all suffer. Humanity, indeed, suffers for the loss of such historically significant places and buildings. But it must be acknowledged that, although it is cruel, unjust and undeserving oppression, it is not the same as what the Baha'i community endured for many years. Years where knocks on the door would mean that a Baha'i would be taken from his house and probably never seen again – except maybe when his body was handed back to his family and they were asked to pay for the replacement cost of the bullets used to kill him. Thankfully, those times are behind us. In fact, Baha'is on an individual level now enjoy a lot of freedom and breathing space. Thankfully, its been a long time since we were saddened with the news of a fellow Baha'i being martyred in Iran.

Now, getting back to Iran and its future, if you've been in a cave for the past 1000 years or if you arrived from Mars just yesterday), Iran is situated smack dab in the middle of the Middle East with a very large landmass that just happens to be on top of massive amounts

of oil and natural gas. It currently has about 70 million citizens with about 11% of them living in the smog filled, sardine like atmosphere of the capital. In contrast to Europe or Japan, most of Iran's population is very young (30 year's old or less).

The economy relies heavily on its chief export – oil. Even with the price of oil so high in recent years, the unemployment stands at 16% officially and somewhere between 20-25% realistically. Around 200,000 residents emigrate every year, either legally or through the porous border between Turkey. Their favourite destinations are North America, and European countries. They don't just leave because of the smog filled Tehran streets, the astoundingly high real estate prices, nor because of the 17% inflation rate (give or take a few basis points). They leave because of two reasons: a dismal economic outlook and lack of basic human rights and freedoms. Two things which all 'experts' are now realizing are intimately intertwined.

About 80% of Iran's wealth and economy is controlled by the Bonyads. These are religious "foundations" or charities which are anything but charitable. Instead, they are fronts for religious figures (Mullas) who manage huge amounts of capital. Often employed in large factories, real estate development, import companies and monoplistic businesses. In effect, one could argue that Iran is not really a theocracy as much as a kleptocracy. Indeed, some token attempts were made to open up the economy in recent years (like the free trade zones in Kush) but for the most part these cosmetic flourishes can't hide reality. Effectively, Iran's economy and fortunes are linked to the price of one commodity: the price of crude oil.

I think those that watch Iran, its political and religious twitches don't pay enough attention to this fact. It is my humble opinion that if any political or religious change is in the offing it will come as a result of severe economic pressure which itself can only be brought on by a much lower crude price. Why, you ask. We'll its quite obvious, with the price of oil so high the Mullah's can afford to just keep running the country the way they have. Keeping enough pressure on society to maintain power while releasing their choking grip just enough to not cause a massive general revolt. Also, the petrol dollars gushing into the economy help to mask over any concerns Iranians may have about such trivial things as a market economy, freedom and human rights, etc.

So basically what I'm saying is if you want to know the future of Iran, just open up your daily newspaper and check the price of oil. At any price above $25 a barrel the Mullah's

are laughing to the bank and the general population of Iran is having to do with the meager crumbs they let fall their way.

Of course, there is not much fun in that. Let's face it, its not really conducive to discussion. Open up your paper and check the price of oil. Done. But in all seriousness, the future of Iran pivots around this one variable, by far more than any other. Until economic changes shake up the status quo, Iran and Iranians will continue to muddle along, taking one step forward and two steps back in a drunken stumble, revealing no grand design or rhyme for the foreseeable future. All you can expect in trying to analyze it is confusion and frustration.

I don't particularly like predicting or coming to this conclusion. The reason is that history has shown us that economic turmoil has a funny way of coinciding with religious persecution. All student's of history have seen this and with respect to Iran's case there is an article that touches on this topic. It is "*Social Change and the Mirrors of Tradition: the Baha'is of Yazd*" by Michael M. J. Fischer (p.25-55) and it appears in "*The Baha'i Faith and Islam*" – proceedings of a symposium at McGill University, March 23-25 1984 [Edited by Heshmat Moayyad] published by the Association for Baha'i Studies. This article mentions the economic and political upheaval which was the backdrop of religious persecution (engulfing Jews, Christians but mostly Baha'is) during several years in late 1800′s and early 1900′s in Iran. As far as I know there is no online version, otherwise I would have put up a link.

So, on the one hand we have the unpleasant possibility of a continuation of the IRI (if the price of oil stays at these levels) and on the other hand we have the unpleasant possibility of a serious bout of religious persecution, which no doubt will possibly target Baha'is once again (if the price of oil falls and causes economic pressure).

My personal observation and analysis regarding this commodity leads me to conclude that it will be either much higher or pretty much at this level in the future, which is why most of my investments for the past 3 years have been related to oil/gas (don't confuse this with financial advice).

Iran's Intergenerational Conflict

Below is a short video from chunnel.tv which summarizes recent Iranian history to explain the opposing forces at work in Iranian politics today:

Smells Like Teen Spirit: Thursday Night Heyat in Iran
This video is a glimpse into the life of the 'devout' Muslim Iranian youth and the type of social activities they are able to participate in:

Poetry Jam in Iran

Culture Of Martyrdom

Linkfest regarding the Iraian election protests: Turmoil in Iran

Is the Universal House of Justice Infallible?

There is an ongoing debate between Baha'i theologians on the definition of infallibility itself. They can't arrive at an agreement and the arguments have been flying back and forth for some time. One theological school of thought says that it has something to do with the Arabic word *maasum*.

But for most people infallibility means that one doesn't make mistakes, everything one says or decides or does is *right*.

So for the sake of simplicity, lets go with that definition. Here's the thing that I just can't wrap my puny mind around: If someone, or some institution, as the case is in the Baha'i Faith is believed to be infallible, then doesn't that require a prerequisite of omniscience?

Let me explain.

If I were to ask an infallible person (say, the Pope) or an institution (say, the UHJ) what the air-speed velocity of an unladen African swallow is, wouldn't they have to know the air-speed velocity of an unladen African swallow before being able to give me an infallible answer?

You might argue and say, "Wait a tick! The Pope and the UHJ are only infallible when it comes to subjects relevant to Roman Catholicism or to the Baha'i Faith. They have nothing to say when it comes to ornithology, therefore they have an automatic 'Get Out of Jail' card. So there! Ha."

ok, fine. Technically you'd be right but I was just making an analogy, I would respond. Try and chillax there, Mr. McNitpickyson.

So getting back to the topic, logic dictates that before one can answer a question or take a position on something in an infallible way… one would require knowledge or information. And lots and lots of it. In fact, if you want to be absolutely right always and without limits, then you would require absolute knowledge, without limits. There's a word for that: omniscience.

$$\int (i_{\mathbb{R}A}(x))^2 \, d\chi(x) = \frac{m^2}{4}$$

And even if one doesn't simply know everything, to be able to be infallible, one would still require knowledge to be able to calculate, analyse and so forth *correctly* to be able to arrive at an infallible conclusion (that is, know not only how to arrive at it but to recognize *the* answer) .

But wait, you pipe up from the back: "What if Pope didn't have to be omniscient to answer, what if the Pope could bend the fabric of space and time and simply reconstitute reality so

that the air velocity of an unladen African swallow would be whatever he deemed it to be? What then, huh, smartypants?"

There is only one thing I would object to in that case. Namely that the Pope, nor the UHJ nor any mortal person has such power. There aren't any omnipotent beings running around. Except for God (and some people don't even believe He exists). And to my knowlege no one else is claiming to be omnipotent.

Back to square one.

This might be a good place to wonder if the the UHJ is indeed omniscient. That would certainly make things simple.

> "However, the Universal House of Justice is not omniscient…"
> (Universal House of Justice — June 14th, 1996)

Well, there goes that theory.

Now, before proceeding, I want to clarify something else. I am not saying that omniscience and infallibility are one and the same. Not at all. One can know everything and be fallible. That is, one can choose to not exercise one's omniscience. Like for example, knowing how to juggle and choosing to sit on your hands. The two are clearly separate and distinct from each other. You can have one without the other, but can you have the other without the one first?

Could one be infallible if one is not omniscient? If yes, how would that work?

Here is the UHJ again:

> We have found nothing in the writings of Shoghi Effendi which suggests that the House of Justice would on any occasion reach a "wrong decision".
> (Universal House of Justice — June 14th, 1996)

How could anyone or any earthly institution be infallible (in the sense of never making mistakes and always being right) if they do not also possess omniscience?

There is the conundrum for me.

If you have an answer, I'd be delighted to hear it. But please use small words so that my few remaining brain cells can handle the synaptic load.

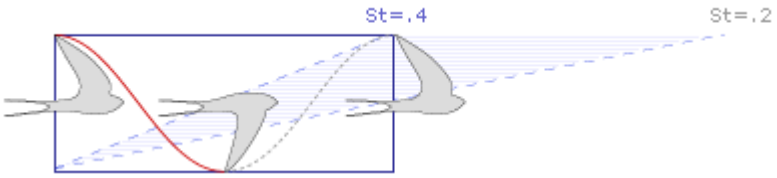
*You might also be interested in **Part II** – a continuation of this discussion.*

Is the Universal House of Justice Infallible? (part II)

My first post about the infallibility of the House of Justice got quite a lot of comments. To all who read and contributed: Thank you! I'm indebted to you all for your thoughts and ideas. Some comments where short, some were long, some were quite funny (unintentionally) while others were surprisingly deep and insightful.

Here is a concise summary the most important points made:

For some the concept of infallibility was quite literal, while others took a more nuanced approach. Some tried to separate the 'intellectual' sphere with the 'spiritual' or 'divine' sphere, saying that I should use more faith and less brains. A few suggested that this whole thing was simply a ruse to incite unity and that it really didn't matter otherwise. Others seemed to be saying that one must simply *believe* that the House of Justice is infallible and by believing so they are.



I'd like to answer those who request me to stop asking so many damned questions and just *believe*. First of all, I am truly sorry that you are missing one of the **most important and cherished characteristics of the Baha'i Faith: independant investigation of truth**. And further, I'm saddened that you have not been able to cast aside the Shi'ite tradition of *taqlid* (blind imitation). Baha'u'llah forbids all Baha'is from this Muslim tradition saying that we must 'see with our own eyes' and 'hear with our own ears'. **If we just accept what we are told and follow a presented path unquestioningly, we are not Baha'is**.

The Baha'i Faith and questions go together like peanut butter and jam. Why else would there be a whole month devoted to them?

To those who asked me in their comments to not use logic or intellect, I say: **Are you kidding?** In the Baha'i faith science and religion are both lauded as paths to truth. One is not superior nor subservient to the other. A true Baha'i would never deny logic, critical thinking and simple deduction because it might conflict with religious dogma. **That is the slippery slope of superstition**. Thanks, but no thanks. In fact, the history of the Faith is replete with examples where simple logic and deduction was used as an effective teaching tool.

One of my favourite examples is that used by a simple Baha'i blacksmith to open the eyes of a learned Mulla who then went on to become a Baha'i and was titled by Abdu'l-Baha, Mirza Abul-Fadl (the Father of All Learning). The story involves rain, angels and dogs. If you don't know it, do yourself a favor and read his wiki entry.

While discussing this interesting topic over on Talisman (the venerable Baha'i discussion forum), one contributor provided this insight:

> The acquired infallibility concerns the final product, not the decision making process. IMO, confusing the final product and the process is where you and others go wrong on this issue.
>
> As I said before, the guarantee for being error free refers to the final product and not to the process no matter what the steps of the process may be called.

This is similar to other responses that I received from fellow Baha'is. Basically, they are saying that the UHJ receives guidance from God and so their decisions are protected from error. *That* is why they are infallible and do not make mistakes. Not because they are omniscient but because, as Dawud put it (in the comments section of the first post) they have "God whispering in their collective ear". Or as the above contributor on Talisman put it, *the process isn't important, the final product is*.

This is a curious sort of logic for me to wrap my mind around. It could very well be that my mind is shrivelled up and simply not as 'wrappable' as it once was. But nevertheless, please permit me to explain why I find this explanation wanting.

If we assume that the ‘process’ isn’t important, then it does neatly side-step the requirement of omniscience that I mentioned. That is a clear advantage that it presents. However, its natural corollary presents us with an insurmountable challenge.

For if we assume that the process isn’t important but rather the final outcome, then the natural conclusion is to simplify the process as much as we can; especially considering the amount of time and resources that it can require.

One especially mischevious person might even suggest that the process be simplified to a Magic 8 ball. Whenever the House of Justice needs to come to an infallible decision, all they have to do is to jiggle the Magic 8 Ball and then to read its answer. If we believe that God’s hand currently directs the UHJ to the infallible decision, then if would follow that God’s hand would direct the Magic 8 ball to an infallible decision also.

If you are not familiar with a Magic 8 ball, another option is a dart and wall system. Presumably, answers could be taped to a wall with a blindfolded and spun UHJ member launching sharp projectiles in the general direction of the ‘answer wall’ while the other 8 duck for their lives under the table. Since God has bestowed infallibility upon the final outcome, He will guide the dart to produce the proper answer (and avoid innocent bystanders).

Now, you might laugh at these silly *processes*. But all I am doing is going by the the logic that the process isn’t important but rather that the outcome is.

I hope that by now it is clear that the process by which a decision is made *is* quite important. I would say critical in fact, to the end result. And as a natural extension, the information used in the process also has a strong correlation to the quality of the decision.

It would seem that the House of Justice itself might agree with such an assertion:

> Like the Guardian, the House of Justice wants to be provided with facts when called upon to render a decision, and like him it may well change its decision when new facts emerge.
> (Universal House of Justice — August 22, 1977)

That seems like good old fashioned common sense, doesn't it?

But can the Universal House of Justice make a mistake? Well, if they are not omniscient and depend on the quality of information presented to them like the rest of us mortals, then it would naturally follow that that is a possibility.

But there is also a clue in this quote that Sen provided in the comments section:

> "The Guardian… is bound to insist upon a reconsideration by them (the UHJ) of any enactment he conscientiously believes to conflict with the meaning and to depart from the spirit of Bah??'u'll??h's revealed utterances."
> (Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Baha'u'llah, p. 150)

And as Sen pointed out:

So the UHJ can be wrong in a deeper sense than just making a mistake. It may be leading in the wrong direction, departing from "the spirit of Bah??'u'll??h's revealed utterances." So can anyone else — Shoghi Effendi's words are not an invitation to stand on the soapbox of our own certainties, rather they indicate the need for humility for everyone.

I would add that what Shoghi Effendi is saying is rather alarming and it is not readily understood by most Baha'is. To me, he is saying that not only can the UHJ make a mistake, **it can in fact go against the very essence of Baha'u'llah's teachings**. This is quite a dire sort of situation he describes. Of course, he is saying this in the context of the responsability of the Guardian in balancing the authority and power of the House of Justice.

And as you know, we do not have a Guardian. So that position is left unfilled and his responsabilities and duties left unfulfilled.

Is Your Baha'i Community Growing?

For a very long time the official estimate of the size of the Baha'i worldwide community has been 5-6 million. This is the figure often cited in media, as was the case in the recent CBS religion special: "What They Believe: Hindus, Zoroastrians, Baha'is".

Reputable sources more recently have cited anywhere between 7.9 and 5.5 million. Unfortunately, official figures are not released by the Baha'i World Center. The various national statistics are aggregated but for reasons unexplained these figures are not shared publicly.

Estimating the size of any religious organization accurately is challenging. The Baha'i Faith is by comparison easier to measure because of the requirement to officially declare membership. As well, Baha'i administrations within every community keep accurate voting records which can be used to approximate community membership very closely.

Perhaps more importantly, the growth rate of the Baha'i Faith is also murky. Several decade old sources put the growth rate at the top of fastest growing religions. However, more recent data seems to show a stagnation or at least a slow down in the growth rate. As well, had this growth rate continued, the 20 year old statistic of "5-6 million" would now

be 8 million instead.

The explosive growth that occurred between 1950-1980 seems to have slowed down significantly. The recent attempts at expansion through Ruhi related strategies do not seem to be bearing fruit. One explanation may be that while Ruhi fits with Columbian culture, it does not with North American or Western European cultures. For more see, "Time for Ruhi to Show Us the Money"

The simplest way to measure a community's growth is to look at a few statistics that are kept by all Local Spiritual Assemblies. Below is the table for these statistics from the largest Baha'i community in Canada:

	April 2010	**April 2011**	**April 2012**
Enrollments	26	26	17
Deaths	9	9	15
Resignations	5	4	3
Net Growth/Decline	+12	+13	-1
Adult Population	1527	1605	1663
Rate of Growth	+0.79%	+0.80%	-0.06%

It must be noted that this city not only is home to the largest Baha'i community, it is also a very dynamic and active one with multiple teaching events and campaigns throughout the year, otherwise known as 'cycles of growth'. The explanation of the growth in the adult population from 1527 in 2010 to 1663 in 2012 is inter-city migration.

As with the average Baha'i community, a significant portion of this Baha'i community's resources are marshaled towards teaching efforts. Traditionally that fell on the shoulders of the local teaching committee which planned and coordinated various events and programs. But with the advent of new ideas originating from FUNDAEC that role has been supplemented with a whole host of other activities: study circles, Ruhi courses, door-to-door direct teaching, and cycles of growth, IPG, CGC, and an alphabet soup of other acronyms.

What has this frenzy of activity accomplished? Not much.

In the past two years the growth has been anemic and this year, nonexistent. In fact, the growth rate may very well be overestimated by these figures because generally, when people choose to withdraw from a religion they rarely submit a formal resignation. More often they simply withdraw from activities and stop participating within the community. It is impossible to measure the true number of persons who have decided to leave the community for this reason. The most helpful measure to remedy this is to look at active members of the community. But this would severely restrict the number further because active participation in feasts, voting in elections, donations to funds, etc. are between 25-30% on average for communities.

The alarming thing is that the juxtaposition of this frenzy of activity and "busyness" with the lack of results is not mentioned nor discussed within the community. The annual report of the LSA certainly does not make mention of it.

Personally, I do not believe that quantitative growth is as important as improvements in the quality of community life. These are more challenging to measure by their very nature, however they are prerequisites for quantitative growth.

But as long as we are embarking on a massive mobilization of resources to produce a result, don't you think it might be a good idea to consult about why the result isn't being achieved?

One of the buzzwords thrown around is "systematization". What could be more systematic than measuring the effectiveness of your actions and correcting course as deemed necessary?

While one of the fundamental pillars of Baha'i life is consultation. Sadly, when it comes to addressing the 'elephant in the room', few Baha'is are informed about the results of their community's teaching efforts and fewer still are ready to bring it up as a topic of discussion.

If you are interested in discussing this within your community, talk to your local LSA and get some feedback from them on the number of enrollments, resignations, deaths and map out the trend for your locality for the past few years. With this information you can then embark on a more fruitful consultation about the activities within your community that have or have not provided the results that you want.

It Is God's Will That You Be Tested

Spending time with Persian Baha'i ladies has some consequences. You eat delicious Persian food (rather, you're forcefed it), you learn to hide your enthusiasm for said food (the Persian practice of "tarof") and you hear a lot about God's Will and "tests".

I have nothing against Persian food but I'm beginning to develop allergies against the superstitious practice of calling everything "God's Will" or "a test".

For one, how are we to know what is God's Will? Sure, the general broad strokes are obvious. They are in every religious dispensation. Don't kill, be nice, don't lie, etc. Those are God's Will for us. That's what He wants us to do. I have no qualms about those. They are clear.

But what about the mundane, everyday things. Was it God's "will" that I be late for an interview? Was it God's "will" that I forgot to call ahead and make reservations? That I burn the toast by forgetting to adjust the setting on the toaster?

I'm not so sure. Maybe it was the Big Guy's will that those things happen. But then again, maybe they were a result of less than devine motives.

But many of the Baha'is that I spend time with have no doubts whatsoever. They know. And they want to tell you. Usually I just play along and don't upset their perception of things. But sometimes I do venture to ask meekly, how exactly it is that they know. In those times, they blink and recover with: why… what else can it be? of course it is God's will.

And then they smile at me as if I'm a total idiot incapable of telling the difference between yogourt and glue.

I keep thinking though that unless you have some sort of direct phone line to God, or are a Prophet you can have no conviction on the matter. But then again, saying "It may or may not be God's will" just doesn't have the same ring to it, now does it?

The other one is when they call difficult situations "tests from God". This one gets me even more. I mean, how the heck do you know? Oh, we already covered that: what else can it be? Yes, ironclad logic. How did I ever miss that one?

Seriously though, I've heard this explanation when people are confronted by challenges in their life and slap the name "tests" on them. Going through a divorce? It is a "test". Children misbehaving? yup, another "test". And you guessed it, it was specifically tailor made by the Big Guy for you.

Again, not once do these people stop to ask how exactly they know or can prove that this is a "test from God".

This insidious practice is seeping into Baha'i culture and I hate it. For one, it is supersition and we are to guard against superstition. When religion doesn't agree with simple reason, something is wrong.

Also, using these superstitious labels, like "God's will" or "test" causes one to become separated from cause and effect. To not feel personally responsible for our actions, our lives and the results that we cause. I don't believe that God wants us to live that way. Some things may very well be God's will or tests, but there is no way for us to know.

What's more, living our lives as if most or almost everything *is* a test or His will, can cause one to feel disempowered. I'd rather live my life believing that some things are under my power and some things under His. Since I will never truly know which is which, I will simply live my life by giving it all I've got. By living my life to the fullest, by trying my darndest, by never ceding an inch. And letting Him sort it all out in the end.

Where someone else might simply sigh and say, "Well, it is God's will…" and sit back, I will redouble my efforts or reflect on what else I can do, what other options I have and how I can learn from this for the future. I attempt to be proactive, a protagonist in my own life, rather than a puppet whose strings are pulled by divine decree.

Where someone else might call a situation a "test from God", and feel vindicated or absolved from responsability, I attempt to reflect on how I contributed to the outcome, how I may react or act differently in the future and what I may do now to improve things. It may be a test, or it may not. That sort of thing is irrelevant to the matter.

Finally, another reason I strongly dislike this practice is that it can be a useful tool in the hand of a bully. Let's say that a situation arises and you disagree with things or how it came to be. If you contact the institutions and let them know, like a good Baha'i is supposed to,

you may get the short and sweet response that “it is God’s will” and that agitating for change would mean that you are making the situation “a test” for yourself.

Farfetched? Impossible? Not at all. This has actually happened.

No related posts.

It’s a little known fact. . . [1]

Those who remember the TV comedy series *Cheers*, will surely also remember the character of Cliff Claven. He was for me, the most lovable character on that show because he was the perennial loser – a guy you just couldn’t help feeling sorry for. You wanted him to win so badly, just once! And every time he tried something, you winced because you just knew that it was going to blow up in his face.

One of the endearing qualities that Cliff Claven had was his ability to spout off meaningless facts and trivia. A cornucopia of insignificant tidbits. And usually he would start off by saying “It’s a little known fact. . . “ And you would brace yourself because it was sort of like a race with the writers on the show to see if they could outdo the stupid thing he said last week.

Well its time for Baha’i Rants to introduce a new feature honouring Cliff’s propensity for useless information. But in this case we’ll be taking the opportunity to pulverize misconceptions or ignorance, as the case may be. In each instance, Baha’i Rants will feature something to do with the Faith which is either assumed to be true (taken for a fact without basis) or flipping it around, astoundingly NOT known by most Baha’is. And then we will proceed to pick it up by the scruff of its scrawny neck and beat it to a pulp. There are a lot of these so lets get started with the first without further ado. The first one is something which 99.999% of Baha’is do NOT know.

It’s a little known fact that . . . **the Arc Project is not finished**.

I can hear the gasps now. What? How can you say that? They spent, what? like $250 million from the sacrificial donations of Baha’is around the world to build the Arc projects

on Mount Carmel! There was a dedication ceremony! (someone pipes up from the back) That's right, I was there!! (yells someone else).

Well, as much as I'd hate to increase your blood pressure. It is a little known fact. And yes, it is a fact. Let me explain.

The Arc Projects are comprised of 5 buildings. These were originally mentioned by Shoghi Effendi and they are:

1. The Archives building (constructed first)
2. The Seat of the Universal House of Justice
3. The International Baha'i Library
4. the Seat of the Hands of the Cause of God
5. the Centre for the Study of the Sacred Texts

If you are sharp you will have noticed several things. One, since we do not have a Guardian (and sadly, can not have a Guardian anymore) we neither have a means of appointing Hands of the Cause of God. Therefore, we can't build a building for the Hands of the Cause of God. So instead, the House decided to build that building for the institution which they created out of thin air to replace the function of the Hands of the Cause of God — namely the International Teaching Centre.

Here is a neat letter in 1987 from the House which outlines their construction project for the coming few years.

Two, the main point of all this explanation: We do not have an International Baha'i Library!

Notice that in that letter (above) the House describes the Baha'i International Library, as follows:

> *The International Baha'is Library*. This Library is the central depository of all literature published on the Faith, and is an essential source of information for the institutions of the World Centre on all subjects relating to the Cause of God and the conditions of mankind. In future decades its functions must grow, it will serve as an active centre for knowledge in all fields, and it will become the kernel of great institutions of scientific investigation and discovery.

ok, now take a look at this aerial picture of Mount Carmel (you can click on it to make it bigger):

The picture shows us from right to left: (far right, you can see the Terraces going up and down the side of the mountain), immediately to the right you can see the Archives building, the Centre for the Study of the Texts (literally carved into the mountain after 3 years of excavation work!), the Seat of the Universal House of Justice, moving along to the left, the International Teaching Centre and then finally, a nice apartment building!

Yup! That's where the Library should be. And hopefully, that's where it will be built in the future (once the owners of the property decide to sell it to the Baha'i community). But until then, no Library. And no Library means no Arc. Well, not in the complete sense of the word atleast. But I'm happy to report that the UHJ did not let such a small and trivial thing as a missing fifth building detract them from declaring the project finished and holding a huge ceremony to celebrate its completion (in mid 2001).

Its a little known fact. . .[2]

Back by popular demand, here is the second installment of this series (for those of you who don't know what this is all about, its basically a fact or trivia that for some strange reason, 99.99% of Baha'is don't know of). Here is your chance to use it to win a bet, to stump the

“know-it-all” or simply for the sheer pleasure of watching them draw a blank. So without further ado, lets get to it:Its a little known fact. . . that Baha’i pilgrimage is NOT to Haifa.

I know, I know. Its a bit of a shock. Some of you are on the waiting list, even as you read. Others have already gone and come back with a few hundred pictures. Well, if you just stay with me for a second more I’ll explain what I mean and why that’s a little known *fact*.

If you haven’t seen it yet, there is a neat little website created by the Baha’i World Centre entitled “Baha’i Pilgrimage”. I think its about time we had this because there are a lot of Baha’is who want to go to pilgrimage and many don’t know what the steps are or where to get information. But “Baha’i Pilgrimage” as the name of that website is a misnomer.

Part of this new website says:

“The first and supreme obligation of all Baha'iss who visit the Holy Land is to pray and meditate in the Sacred Shrines of Bah??’u’ll??h, the B??b and "Abdu’l-Bah??. To receive this bounty of visiting the Holy Places at the Baha'is World Centre is an inestimable privilege, infinitely precious to every Baha'is pilgrim.”

This excerpt is implying that a Baha’i visitor to the Holy Land is a pilgrim and the “supreme obligation” of all Baha’is who go, is to visit the shrines of the three central figures of the Faith. While visiting and spending time in reverent meditation and prayer at those special places is the choice of every Baha’i, it is wrong to imply or state that this is Baha’i pilgrimage.

Why?

Well, for the simple reason that Baha’i pilgrimage was set down by Baha’u’llah in a tablet and He wrote that the sites or locations for it are:

- **His house in Baghdad**
- **and the Bab’s house in Shiraz**

As well, He went on to explain the rites and forms which a Baha’i must follow for pilgrimage. There was also some things which were made explicit which Baha’is *don’t* have to do for pilgrimage – like shaving one’s head, ala the Muslim tradition. You can find the relevant information in two separate Tablets, which are known collectively as the *Suriy-i-Hajj* or the Tablet of Pilgrimage (see below).

Baha'u'llah also mentions pilgrimage in the Kitab-i-Aqdas. There He explains that it is a duty for all Baha'is but that women are *exempt* from pilgrimage – please don't misunderstand this. . .this does not mean that they are prohibited. And that *either* the House of the Bab in Shiraz or the House of Baha'u'llah in Baghdad will do (a Baha'i can decide which they prefer to go to or which is closer).

So why do Baha'is from all around the world go to Haifa and call it pilgrimage? The answer to that has several parts. First of all, after Baha'u'llah's passing, Abdu'l-Baha wrote that Bahji was a site of visitation for Baha'is. He did not specify any specific rites or forms for this visitation. The second is that, currently, Baha'is simply can not perform pilgrimage (as written by Baha'u'llah) because those places, the very buildings Baha'u'llah referred to are either not there anymore, or they are not in the control/ownership of Baha'is. The House of the Bab in Shiraz was razed to the ground after the revolution, while there are sensitive and ongoing negotiations to regain title to the the House of Baha'u'llah in Baghdad. Of course, these buildings and sites will be rebuilt in the future to the exact original specifications which the Baha'is have kept.

Here is the current location of the house of the Bab in Shiraz (the utility poles at 0:23 mark the approximate original location of the room where the Bab and Mulla Husayn spoke on that special night):

Here is an old video showing the outside and inside of the house of the Bab (Persian audio with no English transcription):

It might help to settle the issue if we go back to the original words used when referring to pilgrimage. The word that Baha'u'llah used is 'hajj'. Someone who performed 'hajj' in the Muslim tradition was called 'Haji' on his return. And actually, Persian/Arab Baha'is who performed pilgrimage were also known as 'Haji' (this would explain all the Haji So-and-so's you read about in *Nabil's Narratives* or other historical books). But for the most part they were considered Haji because they had visited Baha'u'llah in person and attained to His presence.

On the other hand, there is another word which is used to denote visitation (*not pilgrimage!*) and it is 'ziyarat'. This word is much more general and it can even refer to going to visit your friend down the street (it is actually a very polite way of saying exactly that in Persian). All other special or holy places visited by Baha'is for reverent prayer and

meditation (the apartment Abdu'l-Baha stayed in Paris, the House of Abbud and Abdu'l-a-Pasha, Mazrayi, the Maxwell house in Montreal, the Shrine of the Bab, the resting place of Abdu'l-Baha, etc.) are actually visitations. Not pilgrimages.

I'm trying to simplify something quite complex here and some may correctly object that the differences are not so clear cut (as 'ziyarat' and 'hajj'). But whatever we decide to ultimately call them or whatever words we choose to use, we must acknowledge that there are two levels at work here. One which is prescribed explicitly by Baha'u'llah (as well as the Bab) and which involves very specific rites and actions to be performed, and another which is much more widely applicable to holy places and has not been mentioned by Baha'u'llah and has no specific rites or actions to be performed.

Am I splitting hairs here? Maybe to some. But I hope others see that all I'm trying to do is to separate truth from misconceptions and ignorance.

So why does the Universal House of Justice continue to use the English word 'pilgrimage' (the equivalent of 'hajj') when referring to trips made to the Holy Land? Beats me. Maybe you can ask them and then let us all know.

Surriy-i-Hajj

Tablet of Pilgrimage to the House of Baha'u'llah: Baghdad
Provisional translation provided by Denis MacEoin
Published in Rituals in Babism and Baha'ism, Pembroke Persian Series Vol. 2, pages 163-8
British Academic Press, 1994

HE IS THE EVERLASTING, THE MANIFEST!

It is incumbent on whomsoever desireth to turn to the most holy direction, to come into the presence of God, the Mighty, the Knowing, to hearken unto the call of God, to behold His beauty, and to inhale the perfume of God, the Mighty, the Powerful, the Exalted, the Great, that he should go forth from his house, journeying unto God, until he entereth the city that hath been named "the Abode of Peace" [Dar al-Salam - Baghd??d]. And when he arriveth there, let him magnify God (with the phrase Allahu akbar), his Lord, with the tongue of his heart and with his outward tongue until he cometh unto the river. And when he reacheth it, let him put on his best clothes and then perform ablutions as God hath commanded him. And when he washeth his hands, let him say: "O Lord, this is water that Thou hast caused

to flow forth through Thy command in the neighbourhood of Thy sacred House (baytika ‘l-hardm). As I have washed my hands with it, O my God, at Thy command, wash me, then, from every stain and sin and omission and from all that Thy good-pleasure abhorreth. Thou, verily, art the Mighty, the All-Powerful.”

Then let wash his face, saying: “O Lord, this is my face that Thou hast purified through Thy will. I beseech Thee, then, by the power of the glory of Thy singleness and the wonders of the names of the manifestations of Thy cause, to cleanse it of all save Thee. Guard it, then, from turning to any but Thee or from beholding them that have failed to seek Thy manifest, spotless, mighty, and generous Beauty.”

Let him, then, cross the bridge with the dignity and comportment of God, magnifying God (with the phrase Allahu akbar) until he reaches the end of the bridge. Then let him turn in the direction of the House, saying at his first step: “O Lord, this is the first step that I have set down in the path of Thy good-pleasure and the first pace that I have taken though Thy will. I have fled, O my God, from all directions in the direction of Thy grace and favours, and I have taken flight from myself and my desires and from all save Thee in the direction of Thy bounty and blessings. O my God, disappoint not them that have hoped for the clouds of Thy mercy and shut not out them that have sought the showers of the glory and generosity. Here am I, O my God! I have sought Thy House, the House round which circle the dwellers of the Celestial Concourse and beyond them the souls of them that are nigh unto Thee among the holy ones. I beseech Thee by the former and by the latter not to prevent my eyes from beholding the wonders of the lights of the holiness of Thy beauty, nor to withhold from my face the manifestations of the breezes that blow from the dawn of Thy meeting, nor to keep back from my heart the fragrances of the glory of Thy revelation and inspiration. Thou, verily, art the Possessor of bounty and might, of grace and mercy and sovereignty, and Thou, truly, art the Possessor of power and strength and grandeur, and Thou, in truth, art near to answer them that pray to Thee.”

Then let him glorify God (with the phrase Allahu abha) and begin to perform the circumambulation. Let him circle about the House seven times, and, when he has completed this action and is come before the door of the House, let him stand and beg forgiveness from God 70 times. Then let him say: “O my God and my Lord. Praise be unto Thee for having shown Thy kindness and generosity to me in that Thou hast caused me to stand in the spot wherein naught is seen but the tokens of the glory of the sovereignty of

Thy oneness and naught is witnessed save the flashes of the lights of the sun of Thy beauty. I beseech Thee by Thee and by Thy Self to purify me from the mire of the world and from its vanities and to burn from the surface of my heart the veils that have kept me back from entering into the floods of the oceans of the glory of Thy unity and have shut me out from entry into the fields of the holiness of union with Thee and meeting Thee. O Lord, turn me not back disappointed from the gate of Thy mercy and send me not away in loss from Thy House. O Lord, forgive me and my parents and my brethren and my family and my kinsfolk, those of them that have believed in Thee and in Thy most great verses in the manifestation of Thy most exalted Beauty. Thou, verily, art the Mighty, the Beneficent."

Let him, then, walk with the utmost gravity and glorify God (with the phrase Allahu abha) until he reacheth the gate, then let him stand and say: "O my God, this is the spot wherein Thou didst lift up Thy voice and in which Thy proof was made manifest and Thy signs shone forth and Thy beauty rose above the horizon and Thy verses were sent down and Thy command was made visible and Thv name was raised up and Thy mention was spread abroad and Thy power was made perfect and Thy sovereignty was exalted above all that are in the heavens and the earth."

Let him, then, address the House and its land and its walls and all that is upon it, saying: "Blessed be thou, O House, inasmuch as God hath made Thee the Spot whereon His feet have trodden. Blessed be thou, O House, inasmuch as the glances of the glory of His greatness have fallen upon thee. Blessed be thou, O House, inasmuch as God hath singled Thee out and made Thee a dwelling-place for His own Self and a location wherein to establish His sovereignty. No earth hath surpassed thee, unless it be the earth that God hath chosen above all the shrines of the world, by that which hath been written down by His Pen, the Preserver. Blessed be thou, O House, inasmuch as through Thee God distinguish between the fortunate and the wretched from this day unto the day whereon the All-Merciful shall shine forth with the lights of a wondrous holiness. Blessed be thou, blessed be thou, inasmuch as God hath made Thee the balance for them that believe in His unity and the uttermost abode of them that know Him, and hath sanctified Thee from the knowledge of them that hate Him and them that disbelieve in Him, in such wise that none may enter Thee save the believer whose heart God hath tried in its faith, nor may any be able to approach thee save him from whom there are wafted the breezes of the praise of God. Blessed be Thou, inasmuch as God hath singled Thee out for them among His servants that are nigh unto Him and them among His creatures that are devoted to Him.

None may touch Thee save them that have utterly detached themselves from all that are in the heavens and the earth, in whose hearts there is naught but the radiance of the lights of the glory of His oneness and in whose inner beings there is naught but the manifestations of the effulgences of the holiness of His eternity. This is a station for which God hath chosen Thee, wherein Thou shouldst pride Thyself above all the worlds. Blessed be Thou and him that built Thee and raised Thee up and served Thee and carried water unto thy roses, and blessed be he that hath entered thee and he that hath gazed upon Thee and he that hath discovered from Thee a breath of the robe of the Joseph of God, the Mighty, the Powerful. I bear witness that he that hath entered within thee, God shall cause him to enter the holy sanctuary on the day whereon the Beauty of the Essence shall be established upon a mighty throne, and He shall forgive the sins of him that taketh refuge in Thee and entereth beneath Thy shadow, and shall fulfil his needs and shall raise him up on the Day of Resurrection with such beauty that his kindred of both past and future shall be illumined by it."

Let him, then, prostrate himself with his face upon the dust of the gate and call upon his Lord like one that is detached and repentant, relating himself to God and saying: "O Lord, I am he that hath acted wrongly towards Thee and rejected Thy beauty, for my self and my desires preoccupied me. Thou, verily, art the Knowing, the All Informed. O Lord, since I have recognized Thy Self, I seek pardon for my former state and for whatever appeared from my tongue and went forth from my mouth and entered into my thoughts. I have returned unto Thee with all my being; Thou, verily, art the Forgiving, the Compassionate. O Lord, when Thou didst make known unto me the places of Thy command and didst awaken me from my sleep and my heedlessness, I set forth from my house in the direction of Thy House, turning my eyes towards Thy bounty and Thy forgiveness. Thou, verily, art the Most Merciful of the Merciful. O Lord, I have come unto Thee with that sin that was heavier than all that is in the heavens and the earth and greater than the creation of all existence, until I have stood before the gate of Thy House, from which no sinner hath been turned away disappointed; I have bowed myself down upon its dust, humbling myself before Thy beauty, abasing myself before Thy sovereignty, and making myself as nothing in Thy presence. O Lord, have mercy on me through Thy compassion and graciousness and ordain, then, for me a seat of truth by Thy side. Make me, then, one of Thy servants that have turned in repentance unto Thee. O Lord, forgive me my sins and my transgressions and all that my hands have committed. Thou, verily, art the Mighty, the Generous."

Then let him raise his head and seek forgiveness from God with this mighty, this great invocation: “O Lord, I seek forgiveness from Thee by my tongue and my heart and my soul and my mind and my spirit and my body and my corporeality and my bones and my blood and my skin. Thou, verily, art the Forgiving, the Merciful. And I seek forgiveness from Thee, O my God, by the invocation whereby the fragrances of mercy have blown upon the people of rebellion and through which the sinful have been clothed in the beauteous garment of Thy forgiveness. And I seek forgiveness from Thee, O my King, by the invocation whereby the power of Thy clemency and Thy grace is made manifest and whereby the sun of loving-kindness and bounty shineth forth above the forms of the sinful. And I seek forgiveness from Thee, O Forgiver of my sins and my Creator, by the invocation whereby the wrongdoers hasten in the direction of Thy pardon and graciousness and through which the seekers stand at the gate of Thy mercy, O Thou the Merciful and Compassionate. And I seek forgiveness from Thee, O my Lord, by the invocation that Thou hast made a fire that burneth away all sins and rebelliousness from every one that hath repented and returned to Thee, regretting what he hath done, weeping over his actions, and secure in Thee, and through which the bodies of all created things are purified from the defilement of sins and wrongful actions and from all that Thy mighty and all-wise Self abhorreth.”

Then let him enter into the House with dignity and tranquillity, as if he beholds God in the realm of His command and the kingdom of His House, until he enters the courtyard (al-sahn) and comes before the qiblih that was singled out for the raising up of the throne of might upon it. Then let him raise his hands and turn his gaze in the direction of His bounties and say: “I bear witness in this place where I stand that there is no god but Him alone; no companion is there for Him nor likeness nor peer nor rival nor deputy nor equal nor similitude; and that the Primal Point (nuqta al-Cild [sic], the B??b) is His servant, His glory, His might, His greatness, His reality, His power, His sovereignty, His majesty, His kingship, His strength, His honour, His nobility, His benevolence, and that through Him, His beauty shone forth and His face was purified and His proof rose above the horizon and His evidence was perfected and His argument was completed and His signs were made luminous, and through Him all that are in the heavens and on the earth were raised to life and they that are in the kingdom of command and creation were resurrected, and through him the breezes of holiness were wafted upon all the worlds. And I bear witness that He Whom God shall make manifest [i.e. Bah??`u` ll??h] is the truth, no doubt is there concerning Him; He is come with the lights of a wondrous holiness, and through Him are

recreated the heavens and the earth and the people of the former and the latter generations. Blessed is he that hath attained unto His days and that entereth His gate and is honoured with meeting Him and circleth around Him and prostrateth himself before Him and visiteth the dust of His feet and standeth in His presence and is of them that arise."

Then let him say: "O Lord, this is Thy House wherein the breezes of Thy bounty and generosity have wafted and wherein Thou hast shone forth in the innermost heart of mystery upon all the manifestations of Thy names and the dawning-places of Thine attributes. None is informed of this save Thee, the All-Knowing. O Lord, this is Thy House from which the signs of Thy grace have been made manifest unto all the worlds and wherein there befell Thee what befell Thee on the part of them that believed and them that disbelieved. Thou, verily, wast patient in all this, notwithstanding Thy power and Thy sovereignty. Thou, truly, art the Knowing, the Wise, the Mighty, the Powerful! O Lord, this is the Spot whereon Thou didst walk with Thine ancient feet and wherein Thou didst raise up Thy voice and Thy melodies and didst make heard Thy call and Thy singing, with wondrous and honeyed tones. O Lord, this is the Spot wherein Thou didst sit upon the Throne of all created things and didst exalt Thyself through the tongue of Thy power above all that are in the heavens and on earth. O Lord, this is the Spot wherein Thy gaze was turned in the direction of Thy bounty and wherein the oceans of power surged within Thy hidden and concealed and guarded Word. O Lord, this is the Spot wherein was Thy Cause within the mystery of mysteries, and wherein Thou didst not move Thy lips as Thou didst wish, and wherein Thou didst conceal Thy radiant face, and wherein Thou wast hidden in the most utter concealment and behind the densest of veils, in such wise that none among all creation recognized Thy Self. O Lord, this is Thy House that was shamed after Thee by Thy servants, who looted whatever was therein and plundered all that was within it; thus did they dishonour Thee and make war against Thee in their heart of hearts and break Thy covenant and shatter Thy bond; yet didst Thou conceal all this and didst pass over them through Thy wondrous bounty. O Lord, divest me not of the bounty of Thy protection, nor take from me the garment of Thy favour and pardon, nor cause me to be far removed from the precincts of Thy mercy, nor deprive me of the fountain of Thy exalted grace. O Lord, sanctify me from all save Thee and bring me near unto Thy Self and honour me with meeting Thee. Thou, verily, art the Powerful, the Knowing, the Understanding, the Bringer to life, the Vivifier, the Slayer. O Lord, cause me to attain unto that which Thou hast willed for those of Thy servants that are nigh unto Thee. Ordain, then, for me the best of what Thou hast ordained for the sanctified among Thy chosen ones."

Let him then be silent within himself and be at rest in his innermost being. Then let him turn in his heart and with his hearing in the direction of the House. If he should discover the fragrance of God and hear His call, he may be assured within himself that God has forgiven him his sins and has passed over him and relented towards him and beholdeth him as on the day whereon he was born of his mother. But if he should not discover the fragrance of God, the Mighty, the Powerful, let him perform again the ritual on this day or one another day until he discovereth it and heareth [the call]. This is that which hath been decreed by the Pen of a glorious and wise One upon the Tablets of a hidden holiness. Thus doth God open the gates of grace and bounty unto the face of the heavens and the earth, that perchance men may not deprive themselves of the mercy of God and His bounteousness. This, verily, is true guidance and a remembrance from Us unto all the worlds.

Tablet of Pilgrimage to the House of the Bab: Shiraz

Provisional translation provided by Denis MacEoin

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O Muhammad, when the fragrances of holiness have drawn thee unto them and turned thee unto the land of the All-Merciful that thou mayest discover the breezes of divine praise, go forth then by permission of Thy Lord, the Generous, unto the spot around which circle the angels that are nigh unto God, they that sing His praises about the Throne. At the moment when thou arisest from thy place, seeking to turn in the direction of God, thy Lord, take off from thy body the robe of self and desire and from thy feet the sandals of sin and wickedness, for thou art entering the spot that none may reach save he that casteth behind him all that are on earth and in the heavens, wherein naught but the greatest righteousness shall be accepted, if thou art of them that comprehend, and around which circle the Mount of Command and the Land of Holiness and the Sinai of Glory and the hearts of them that ascend at all times unto the heaven of nearness. None other shall ever attain unto it nor be mentioned by God as having reached it, even should he dwell there for a thousand years as you number them.

And when thou hast journeyed from thy self and from the world and its people and hast travelled unto God, thy Lord, and hast reached the spot at which thou beholdest the

outskirts of the city, dismount and stop where thou art and say: “Spirit and light and glory and praise be upon thee, O City of God, O dwelling-place of His names, O treasury of His attributes, O source of His bounties, O mine of His grace, O place of the manifestation of His effulgences that have encompassed all creation. I bear witness that from thy outskirts appeared the Primal Point li.e. the B??b] and the ornament of pre-existence and the eternal mystery and the universal word and the fixed decrees and the hidden secrets. Thus hast thou surpassed all others in receiving grace from God, the Protector, the Self-Subsisting.”

Lift up, then, your hands unto God, thy Lord, with humility and selfeffacement, with submission and pleasing contentment, and say: “O Lord, praise be to Thee for the wonders of Thy gifts and the graces of Thy bestowals. How can I give thanks to Thee, O my God, for having provided me with the visitation of Thy House and having honoured me with it and having chosen me for this bounty in which none hath preceded me and having taught me what none hath known but Thee? Wherefore, O my God, I have fled from the house of my self and taken refuge in the place in which Thy most exalted Self hath been established; I have taken flight from whatever hath kept me back from drawing nigh unto Thee and gone for protection unto the precincts of Thy most great mercy. Deprive me not, then, O my God, of that which belongeth unto Thee and cause me not to be occupied with any but Thee. Thou, verily, art the Mighty, the Forgiving. O Lord, make me steadfast in Thy love and in the love of Thy friends, and cause me not to be of them that have disbelieved in Thy verses after they were sent down, them that have mocked them after their perfumes had encompassed all created things and all that was brought into existence in the visible and the invisible worlds. O Lord, send unto me the rod of Thy grace and bounty that I may cleave therewith the sea of self and desire, pass over it, and reach the pavilion of the glory of Thine exaltation and the tabernacle of the holiness of Thy protection, lest there be made manifest from me that which Thy good-pleasure abhorreth. Thou, verily, art He that doeth as He willest, and Thou art, in truth, the Lord of this firmly builded House.”

Ride on, then, until thou reachest a spot at which there shall be between thee and the city only a thousand steps, be it more or less. Whereupon, dismount and immerse thyself in water, as thou hast been commanded in the Book of God, the Protector, the Exalted, the SelfSubsisting. And when thou comest forth from the water, trim thy moustache, then clip thy nails, then shave thy head, then make use of the best of perfumes, then put on the best clothes you are able to afford. And if thou art not able to perform that which We have commanded thee, be thou not saddened, for God hath pardoned thee; He, verily, is the

Powerful, the Forgiving, the Pardoner. Strive, then, within thyself that, at the moment thy eye falleth upon the city and thou comest close to it, thy heart may be purified from the mention of all things in such wise that thou mayest cast behind thee all that hath been created between the earth and the heavens, for thou art at that moment walking before the King of all creation, thy Sovereign of names and attributes. Thus instructeth thee the Pen of God, thy Lord and the Lord of all things, if thou art of them that know.

And when thou hast performed that which We have commanded thee, rise from that spot and turn your face towards the House. Then stop, then raise your hands in humble devotion to God, the Powerful, the Protector, the Beloved, and say: "O my God, this is the spot through which the eyes of them that desire Thee have been solaced and the hearts of Thy lovers have been attracted; this is the utmost goal of them that seek Thee and the highest desire of them that yearn for Thee. This is the spot wherein the eyes of them that know Thee have rained tears in their separation from Thee and the faces of them that have attained unto Thee have turned yellow in their longing for Thy beauty. I beseech Thee, O my God, by it and by the effulgences of the lights of the glory of Thy oneness and the flashes of the manifestation of the holiness of Thy divinity, to release me from the fire of my self and to sanctify me from all that is unworthy of Thy sovereignty. Thou, verily, art the Protector, the Self-Subsisting."

Lower, then, thy hands until they reach the level of thy cheeks, then magnify God (with the phrase Allahu akbar) nine times, then raise thy hands yet again unto God, thy Lord and the Lord of all that hath been and all that is, and say: "O my God, this is the city wherein Thy sovereignty was made manifest and the signs of the glory of Thy grandeur appeared and Thy verses were sent down and Thy word was completed and Thy might was exalted and Thy proof shone forth and Thy mercy encompassed all things and all that is in the heavens and the earth. There beareth witness unto this my self and my heart and my tongue and beyond them blessed servants. Whereupon, I beseech Thee, O my God, by it [the city] and all that hath been manifested in it to remove that which hath kept me far from the shore of the holiness of Thy mercy and bounty and shut me out from the precincts of the outpouring of Thy grace and bestowal. Clothe me, then, O my God, in the robe of Thy graciousness and bounty. Thou wiliest and Thou art, truly, the Mighty, the Exalted, the Beloved. Give me, then, to drink, O my God, from the fountain of the glory of Thy knowledge and the living waters of the holiness of meeting with Thee, waters which, were but a drop from them to be sprinkled upon all created things, they would be raised to eternal, everlasting

life, standing before Thy face and the manifestations of the flashes of the lights of Thy countenance. Thou, verily, art the Mighty, the Exalted, the Holy."

Lower, then, thy hands and walk upon the ground with the dignity of God and His tranquillity. And as thou walkest proclaim the singleness of thy Lord (with the phrase "there is no god but God") then proclaim His greatness (with the phrase Allahu akbar), then His holiness (with the phrase Allahu aqd??s), then His majesty (with the phrase Allahu amjad). Follow, then, in the ways of the messengers and the manners of them that are near to God, saying: "Here am I, O my God, here am I; greetings unto Thee, and the light be before Thee." Repeat these words as much as will not cool down the fire of thy ardour and passion. Thus We have instructed thee in truth that thou mayest be of them that act in accordance with what they have been commanded. Know, then, that thou didst answer thy Lord with these words when He ascended the Throne and called upon all created things with His words "Am I not your Lord?" Those words are the secret of those others, if ye be of them that ponder upon the mysteries of their Lord. Indeed, shouldst thou behold with the eye of thine inner being, thou shalt at that moment behold Him raised upon the thrones of all created beings, crying: "No God is there but Me, the Protector, the Self-Subsisting." Know, then, O pilgrim, thy value and station at that moment. Give thanks, then, to God that this has been bestowed upon thee and that He hath aided thee therein. Verily, there is no God but Him; creation and command are His and all act according to His bidding. Blessed art thou, O servant, in that thou hast entered the land of holiness, the Paran of the Spirit, and the Sinai of Command. Yea, shouldst thou make sharp thy sight, thou wilt behold all about thee circumambulating. By God, O servant journeying from thy home, should God open thy vision and shouldst thou turn thy gaze above the head unto the heavens, thou wilt behold the sanctuaries of holiness, the habitations of loving-fellowship, the people of the pavilion of the heavenly kingdom, the inhabitants of the thrones of the kingdom of might, the bodies of the holy ones among the manifestations of the realm below and the kingdom above all moving in the heaven of holiness above thy head, extolling with thee the unity, the greatness, the holiness, and the majesty of the Lord of the City and of him that appeared from it and arose therein. Thus shalt thou behold the matter, if thou art of them that see with the eyes of the spirit.

And when thou reachest the spot at which thou art come nigh unto the gate of the city at a distance of 20 paces, stop at the command of God, thy Lord, the Lord of all things, and the Lord of this praiseworthy scene. Extol, then, the greatness of God 19 times, then address

the city on My behalf, saying: “May God curse a people that have interposed themselves between Us and the lights of thy holiness, O City of God, and who have kept us back from inhaling the fragrances of the holiness of Thy oneness and from dwelling within the precincts of the glory of Thy mercy and from standing in the courtyard of the gate of the outpouring of Thy compassion.” Turn, then, thy gaze unto the most great spectacle, in the direction of the wall of the city and whatsoever hath been created therein and hath existed within it, for upon all of these hath fallen the eye of God, the Mighty, the Protector, the Self-Sufficient. Say: “O wall of the City! Blessed be thou, inasmuch as there shone forth above thee the lights of the sun of thy Lord, the Exalted, the Most High. O trees of the City! Blessed be ye, inasmuch as the breezes of holiness have been wafted upon you from the direction of eternity. O air of the City! Blessed be thou, inasmuch as the breath of God, the Mighty, the Powerful, the Beloved, was spread within thee. O earth of the City! Blessed be thou, inasmuch as the feet of thy Lord, the All-Merciful, have walked upon thee and the form of the Praised One hath passed over thee in the days when all were wrapped in the veils of their own selves. ”

Walk, then, until thou reachest the city; and when thou hast attained its presence and arrived at its gate, place thy face upon the dust of the gate, that thou mayest discover the fragrance of thy Lord, the Exalted, the Most High and may be of them that are nourished with the water of life. Know, then, that from its dust is manifested the decree of water, and from its water the decree of air, and from its air the effect of fire, and from a torch ignited from it hath appeared the decree of ‘B’ and ‘E’ [@ukm al-kdf wa'l-nan - i.e. kun, "be"], if thou art of them that know.

This is how We have described it unto thee in the land and among these people that are unconscious in the drunkenness of self. Otherwise, by Him in Whose hand is my soul, an atom of its dust is more glorious in the sight of God than all that hath been created in the meadows of eternity and all that hath been decreed in the tablets of destiny within the mystery of fate in the realm of the divine decree. Thus do We cast upon thee the secrets of the Cause, that thou mayest be of them that comprehend.

When thou hast kissed the dust and derived a blessing therefrom, raise up thy head, then stand and magnify God (with the phrase Allahu akbar) 19 times, then walk with the dignity and tranquillity of God and with His grandeur and majesty until you arrive before the House. Then stop and say: “I bear witness by my tongue and my soul and my spirit and my

body that this is the spot whereon prostrate themselves the inhabitants of the empyrean realm and the denizens of the kingdom of God's decree and they that inhabit the highest mansions of eternity behind the veils of grandeur. Through it all things have been made manifest and through it the breezes of bounty have blown upon the forms of all the worlds. And this is the spot whence the inhabitants of the Concourse of Eternity derive their blessings and the hearts of them that are established between earth and heaven obtain their illumination. Every day the dwellers of the crimson chambers sweep its courtyard and the angels that are nigh unto God brush it with the tresses of the spirit. And this is the spot wherein the Beauty of the All-Merciful appeared and in His own person ascended the Throne of Forgiveness and decreed that which He willed for all creation. He, verily, is the One that doeth as He willeth and decreeth as He desireth and performeth whatsoever He wisheth. I bear witness that, from a handful of this dust, the first Adam was created, wherefore was he named "the father of man" (Abu 'IBashar) in the kingdom of names, and God made him His remembrance amongst all created things."

Bow down, then, with thy face upon the dust, then place thy right cheek upon it and say with my tongue: "Praised be Thou, O God, my God. This is Thy servant that hath detached himself from all directions, turning in the direction of Thy oneness, and hath freed his soul from all apart from Thee, and hath clung to the cord of the bounty of Thy grace, and hath come in his completeness unto the meadows of the glory of Thy forgiveness. Cause to blow, then, O my God upon my heart the breezes of the glory of the holiness of Thy bounty and upon my inner being the fragrances of the majesty of the glory of Thy favours. Cast me not away disappointed, O my God, from Thy gate or despairing from the manifestations of the sun of Thy bounties. Thou, verily, art the Powerful over what Thou wiliest and Thou art the Protector, the Mighty, the Powerful."

Then stand and turn to the right of the House, in the direction of thy Lord, the Exalted, the Mighty, the Wise. Raise, then, thy hands unto God, the Exalted, the Most High and say: "Praised be Thou, O God, my God. I have raised the hands of my hope unto the heaven of Thy bounty and grace, and I have fastened the fingers of my reliance upon the cord of Thy grace and favours. I beseech Thee by him through whom Thou didst clothe all created things with the robe of Thy guidance and didst raise to life all existence from the power of Thy compassion and generosity, not to lock the door of Thy knowledge upon the face of my heart nor the door of Thy mercy upon my soul. Cause me, then, O my God, to be such as will be worthy of the power of the glory of Thy singleness and the majesty of the

holiness of Thine eternity. Thou, verily, art the Gracious, the Bestowing, the Mighty, the Generous. And I, O my God, have become detached from mine own self, hastening unto Thy Most Exalted Self, and have fled from mine own abode and stood before Thy most pure and most glorious House. Wherefore, I beseech Thee not to leave me unto myself nor unto them that keep back mankind from the love of Thy beauty and debar Thy servants from Thy mighty and unbending path."

Circle, then, about the House on my behalf seven times. Thus commandeth thee the Ancient Beauty and teacheth thee what none in all the worlds doth know. And at the time when thou art circumambulating the House of the Lord, make mention of Him in thy heart and upon thy tongue and turn within thyself unto the direction of the mighty Throne. And when thou hast completed thy circum-ambulation, present thyself within the first portico, before the door of the sanctuary, then, stand, then raise thy hands unto the heaven of the outpouring of the grace of thy Lord, the Mighty, the Inaccessible. And I counsel thee that, at that time when thou dost raise up thy hands, raise them with such yearning that thereby the hands of all beings may be raised up towards the heaven of the grace of thy Lord. And when thou desirest to call upon God, thy Lord, call upon Him with such devotion that thereby the tongues of all atoms may utter the praise of thy Creator and may make mention of Him that brought thee into existence, the Powerful, the Mighty, the Wondrous. And if thou be not thus, it is not fitting for thee to stand in the spot whereon have stood the bodies of the holy ones and them that are nigh unto God. Nor art thou worthy of thy relation unto my Self nor thy habitation beneath the shadow of my love, which God hath made a cutting sword whereby to separate the unbelievers from them that extol His oneness. And when thou hast raised thy hands unto the clouds of the mercy of thy Lord, the Mighty, the Knowing, the AllInformed, say: "I bear witness that no god is there but He; He is alone, no companion is there for Him nor likeness nor deputy nor comparison nor rival nor equal nor similitude for His sovereignty, the Exalted, the Inaccessible, the Most High. From all eternity He was one in His Essence and one in His attributes and one in His deeds and unto all eternity He shall be as He hath ever been in the glory of His majesty and the sovereignty of His sublimity, such that the mystic knowers have confessed their inability to attain unto the meadows of the holiness of His knowledge and the devoted ones have admitted their powerlessness to ascend unto the heaven of His mention and His praise. He, verily, is the Protector of all things and He, in truth, is the Mighty, the AllGenerous. I bear witness that the Primal Point [the B??b] our Lord the Exalted, the Most High is, truly, His Manifestation in the realm of the empyrean and His Appearance in the kingdom of the

decree and His Dawning-place in the domain of destiny. Through Him all created things are brought to life and all existence is renewed and the balance of justice hath been set up upon the station of praiseworthy glory. Through Him the Bird of the Throne hath crowed and the Dove of Glory hath warbled and the resurrection of the command hath come to pass and all that lay hidden in the treasuries of hidden glory hath been made manifest. Through Him the heavens of pre-existence were raised up and the clouds of bounty were elevated unto this most holy and most notable sky and the sun of grace and beneficence shone forth from the horizon of resplendent holiness. Through Him the oceans of verses surged in the kingdom of names and attributes and the time set for the command arrived with that which was decreed in the tablets of inaccessible majesty. And I bear witness that, through Him, the veil of mystery was removed from the beauty of grandeur and the secrets of the unseen were revealed in the kingdom of the divine decree, and that through Him every poor and needy one ascended unto the heaven of riches and every transient one rose up unto the dwelling-places of eternal life and every sick one was raised to the abodes of healing within pavilions of shining light. And I bear witness that this is the Spot wherein Thou didst ascend the Throne of the glory of Thy unity and didst bring into being all creation, both former and latter, through the power of Thy will and Thy desire, and wherein the clouds of Thy grace rained down upon all created things.

"Wherefore, I beseech Thee, O my God, by Thy hidden and Most Great Name and Thy concealed and most perfect word whose manifestation Thou didst promise unto Thy servants at the time of Mustaghdth [i.e. at the time of the appearance of Him Whom God shall make manifest], to bring me unto the shore of the ocean of Thy forgiveness and to erase all that I have enumerated of my most great sins and my most mighty transgressions; then forgive, O my God, my father and my mother and my family and those whom I have related unto myself, them that have believed in Thee and Thy signs. Make, then, for me, O my God, a seat of truth by Thy side and cause me to be united with those of Thy servants that are nigh unto Thee. I ask Thee, then, O my God and my Beloved, not to make me to be one of them that circle about Thy House in Thy land and deny Thy sacred House within the Manifestations of Thy Self and the Dawning-places of the glory of Thy Self-Subsistence and the Locations of the glory of Thy Lordship. Thus, O my God, is my utmost wish and desire. Thou, verily, art the Sovereign, the Powerful, the Mighty, the Wise. I ask Thee, then, O my God, by Thy beauty whereby the suns of the glory of Thy bounty have been made luminous and the rays of the lights of the holiness of Thy generosity flashed forth, to cause me not to be distressed upon the day whereon every soul shall be distressed, on which the

possessors of pomp and leadership shall be puffed up with pride, on which the feet of them that have attained shall slip, on which the lamentation of all things shall be raised, and on which every resplendent and shining light shall be darkened. Take hold, then, of my hand, O my God, with the hand of Thy grace and favours and deprive me not on that day of the fragrances of the glory of Thy holiness nor from hearkening unto the melodies of Thy new creation, and cause me not to follow upon that day behind every croaking, sinful one. Open my eyes through Thy grace that I may recognize Thee by Thine own Self, not by that which is other than Thee, and that I may behold the wonders of the lights of Thy Beauty by what Thou hast bestowed upon me through Thy bounty, not that which belongeth unto men. For Thou hast not created any proof for Thyself save Thine own Essence, nor any evidence save Thy signs. Thou, verily, are He that ariseth, the Ruler, the Knowing, the All-Informed. Praise be to God, Lord of all the worlds."

Whereupon, end thou thy pilgrimage, for We have not permitted anyone to approach closer than this unto the sanctuary, for before that spot shine the lights of the Essence from behind the names and the attributes. And, apart from that, courtesy must be observed, for that is one of the best of all attributes in the sight of God, King of the earth and the heavens. Thus have We sent down upon thee the command with a shining and manifest proof. It is our desire that, from every city, one should go forth on My behalf and for his own sake to visit the House of God and that he may be a pilgrim. By God, at every step mercy and grace shall descend upon him from the heaven of resplendent holiness, and at the same time when he raises his foot for the first step and sets it down, God shall forgive his sins and the sins of his mother and his father and all that are related unto him. Thus hath the grace of thy Lord encompassed all created things, whether of the first or of the last. By God, whosoever visiteth the House, it is as if he hath visited God within the pavilion of the glory of meeting with Him and the tent of the majesty of His Beauty. Thus do We inform thee of the call that is mighty by the side of the Throne.

Whosoever visiteth the House as We have commanded him, God shall raise him up after his death within the paradise of majesty and grandeur in such a beauteous form that the dwellers of the Concourse on High shall be illumined by the lights of his face, and all that are in the exalted heavens shall be commanded to appear before him and to circle about him and to make their pilgrimage unto his beauty every morning and evening. O trustees of God upon the earth, strive unto the most great mention, and cast away all that is in your hands and turn your faces unto the Abode of God, the Mighty, the Powerful, the All-

Knowing. Be ye steadfast, O people, in this station that, if all that are on earth should rise up against you, ye would not pay the least attention to them and would remain firm in the faith of God. The unbelievers shall prevent you performing what God has sent down upon you on account of the rancour that is in their breasts. But God shall do as He willeth through His word; He, verily, is the Powerful, the Mighty.

Know, then, that We have written concerning pilgrimage to the House detailed and vast tablets, but We have not sent them until now, If God wills, We shall send them in truth. He, verily, is the Guardian of the Messengers. That which We have sent is what was sent down from the kingdom of divine power in a brief form, for the angels that are nigh unto God and the inhabitants of the Exalted Concourse love to be brief in their outward acts. And inwardly, let there be at all times those that perform the pilgrimage. Thus have We taught thee and made known unto thee the paths of holiness and guided thee unto the shores of manifest grace.

It’s a little known fact. . . [3]

You know it!

Back by popular demand, here is the third installment in this series. For those of you who don’t know what this is all about, its basically a fact or trivia that for some strange reason, 99.99% of Baha’is don’t know of.

Now, I’ve been getting some feedback which goes something like this: “Meh, I *knew* that.” I think those that respond like that don’t really get what this is all about. It isn’t about what *you* may know or not know; its about something which the vast majority of the Baha’is out there don’t know. Oh, and if you *do* know, then good on ya mate! We’re all very proud of you.

So without further ado, lets get down to business:

Its a little known fact. . .that Baha’is are not forbidden from reading covenant-breaker material.

Shocking! Scandalous! Get my oxygen mask! Where’s that thorazine drip? Nuuuurse!!

Once you are appropriately medicated and are ready to go on, I will tell you that indeed this is true. See for yourself:

> To read the writings of Covenant-breakers is not forbidden to the believers and does not constitute in itself an act of Covenant-breaking.
> (Universal House of Justice — October 29, 1974)

> The House of Justice has instructed us to say that, as you are no doubt aware, it is not prohibited for Baha'is to read the writings of Covenant-breakers…
> (Secretariat — October 12, 1978)

And yet there is a persistent myth that Baha'is are forbidden or not allowed to (according to Baha'i law or authoritative instructions) to read material which was written by a covenant-breaker.

That this myth exists and is perpetuated is inexcusable – hence our shattering of it. But it is understandable once you remember two things. One, that the UHJ *strongly* discouraged Baha'is from reading such material (many individuals misinterpret this to mean that they are not free to decide for themselves) and two, that covenant-breakers aren't looked upon too kindly. Well, that's putting it diplomatically. In the minds of most Baha'is, they are categorized, in terms of attractiveness, somewhere among psychopaths and lepers (or a psychopathic leper). In short, they are to be shunned and avoided, at all costs.

A rather extreme measure, I'm sure you'll agree. So why not then go one step further from discouragement to outright banning if covenant-breakers are so nasty?

I think the answer is that to do so would be to go against the most fundamental principle of the Baha'i Faith: individual and independant investigation of truth. And it is telling just how much this verity is prized that when it goes up against such a charged facet of the Faith as covenant-breakers, it comes out on top.

Interestingly enough I had a conversation a while back on LJ's Baha'i forum on this very topic. One of the moderators (who finds it vital to their existence to correct me – especially when I'm not wrong) piped in and screamed:

> WRONG!

And then went on to post quote after quote (like the above) which actually showed that Baha'is are not forbidden from reading covenant-breaker material. I don't have a link to that because my comments as well as others' were censored by the same moderator. But this moderator also 'corrected' me in this other thread. I mentioned that the UHJ only has legislative authority and then I was told 'incorrect' by the moderator and given quotes which shows that the UHJ only has legislative authority. Another person did something similar in this thread (here it is without censorship). If you need to go lie down after reading that, I don't blame you. It seems that this whole topic evokes such a strong emotional reaction from Baha'is that they enter a state of temporary insanity. But I digress.

So the next time some Baha'i implies or says that they are forbidden from reading covenant-breaker material, you can show that this is patently, categorically, and absolutely *false*.

Just be ready to duck in an alley to escape the shrapnel as they explode in a hot flash of indignant (or is that ignorant) rage.

Keep Calm and Ruhi On – Thoughts on the Frontiers of Learning Video

Last year the ITC sent a team around to world to document the success of four Baha'i communities in implementing the core activities. This film was released during the international Baha'i convention and has become a central focus of attention and conversation for Baha'is around the world. A reader of this blog, Rowland, mentioned the video recently in the post about the election of the UHJ. In case you haven't yet, I invite you to watch the video. I wanted to briefly share my thoughts on it and what it means from a broader perspective about the Baha'i worldwide community.

At first glance the video is quite uplifting because it showcases examples of community development where Baha'is have had a meaningful and positive impact. For example, in India we are shown how the institute process has lead some villagers to soften their deep-seated male chauvinism and to question the cultural norm of 'castes'. It seems all very wonderful! Apparently the Baha'i community has discovered community development. More than that, it comes across as if the Baha'is have invented community development.

The truth is that the contributions of Baha'is around the world is miniscule compared to everything else out there, both in terms of manpower and in terms of resources; and it comes very late. Nevertheless it is praiseworthy and should be acknowledged as such. At the same time, it is important to maintain perspective and realize that there are other groups doing amazing work out there light years ahead of the Baha'i community and that we can learn much from them. This, I would submit, is the more appropriate tone to strike, rather than one of triumphalism and chest-beating "overstatements of the Baha'i experience".

As a matter of fact, many would suggest that the Baha'i community in India itself is in more dire need of this program than anyone else in that country. For generations it has been beset by scandals and improprieties. But that is another subject best left for another time.

The success of the community development programs in Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in Bihar Sharif in India shown in Frontiers of Learning also speak to another important point. Both these communities are in developing countries and have many specific needs that the Ruhi courses do address to some degree. For example, the position and role of women, the unity of mankind (castes discrimination in India and age discrimination in the Congo). However the same can not be said of other, more developed, countries; for example, Norway or Switzerland. In these countries such issues have been debated and resolved long ago. And while the treatment of gender equality takes place within a continuum and can never be truly finished, speaking about it in such basic terms simply would not resonate to the extent that it does in India and the Congo.

And this is exactly why the Ruhi courses receive scant attention in more developed countries and why they have gained minimal if any traction there. A simplistic and rudimentary treatment of such issues sounds tone-deaf and condescending to a more sophisticated and aware populace. The fact that the Baha'i community has received disproportionate results from the developing world in response to the Ruhi courses is a matter or record. Last year in the annual Ridvan message, the Universal House of Justice announced the plans for the construction of seven local houses of worship to support and augment the achievements of specific Baha'i communities with respect to the core activities.

All of the planned national Mashriqu'l-Adhkar are located in poor, developing countries : Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of the Congo; Bihar Sharif, India; Battambang, Cambodia; Bihar Sharif, India; Matunda Soy, Kenya; Norte del Cauca, Colombia; and Tanna, Vanuatu. Not a single one is located in a Western, developed country.

This is not at all surprising when one approaches community development with a supercilious "one size fits all" cookie-cutter program focused on the lowest common denominator and demands that the practitioners and participants adapt to the methodology and content instead of adapting the content and program to the contingent needs of each audience. For more on this, see previous treatments of the subject in: Time for Ruhi to "Show Us the Money".

It isn't really noteworthy to find four locations around the world where there is a modicum of success. If the Ruhi courses are truly that great, the real question is, why isn't there more? why don't Baha'is see the same in their own communities?

The inclusion of the example of Colombia is a great case in point. As mentioned in the previous link, the specific area featured in Columbia is the birthplace of the Ruhi courses some 40+ years ago. The success shown in the video is put in its proper context when we realize that the program has been running continuously for more than two generations.

With that in mind, any warm and fuzzy feelings give away to curiosity as to why so little has been achieved in so long a time period. What I wrote previously still applies:

> If, after 40 plus years of gestation and maturation, through continuous implementation and iterative development and perfection; with a program structure incredibly attuned to and complementary to the culture of its host environment; with the full financial, moral and administrative support of the Baha'i institutions; if with all these advantages, Ruhi can not provide significant results that prove its efficacy beyond a doubt in its native country of Colombia… then by what rationale should we expect it to suddenly start to succeed now? and especially in other, much more hostile cultures?

The second major issue I have with the video and with the whole sequence of Ruhi courses is that it is beset by muddled thinking. Ask yourself: what is the purpose of all this?

If you have just finished watching the Frontiers of Learning video, you will most probably say community development or serving or contributing to society or similar noble and altruistic notions.

But if you think about it more carefully you'll realize that that isn't a full answer. In fact, if you pay particular attention to the video itself, you'll notice that the purpose of Ruhi is to teach the Baha'i Faith and to grow the community. In the Toronto segment you may recall that the youngest member of the Toronto Local Spiritual Assembly, Alexandre Arjomand, refers to previous (awkward) teaching attempts:

> In the early days very very few of us had any experience. I remember in those days we would go into a bookstore and hangout in the religions section and talk to anybody who wandered by there. Or we would sit in a coffee shop with a Baha'i book in our hands hoping somebody would ask us what to talk about.
> Frontiers of Learning (46m 30 sec)

And there are many other pieces of evidence if you still doubt that "all this" is about teaching. The Universal House of Justice continuously has referred to the Ruhi courses as "developing the capacities for entry by troops". The jargon of the institute process also belies its purpose: IPG or "intensive programmes of growth" and "expansion" and "consolidation".

This term, by the way, was first mentioned by the Universal House of Justice in a message to the Conference of the Continental Board of Counsellors dated January 9th 2001:

> The friends who participate in these intensive programmes of growth should bear in mind that the purpose is to ensure that the Revelation of Baha'u'llah reaches the masses of humanity…

Also, one of the key components of the Ruhi courses (Book Six) is "Anna's Presentation". Participants are asked to memorize it to teach and more so, to ask an individual to join the Baha'i Faith:

> I am sure you are aware that I am inviting you to join a religion and not just accept a collection of nice ideals.

But you may ask, why is this question of purpose even important?

Well, for two reasons. First and very obvious, before embarking on any endeavor it is only intelligent to know why one is doing something. Second, because it is the only way that we can gauge the effectiveness or success of that undertaking.

So is the purpose to do good and to serve our fellow man? to teach the Faith (numerical growth)? to build capacity (qualitative growth)?

You see, this is what I mean by muddled thinking. Ask 5 Baha'is and you'll get 8 answers.

The statement of purpose taken directly from the officlal Ruhi website makes no mention of the purposes outlined above but instead focuses on the community building aspect:

> The Ruhi Institute is an educational institution, operating under the guidance of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'iss of Colombia, which dedicates its efforts to the development of human resources for the spiritual, social, and cultural development of the Colombian people.

In the recent document Insights from the Frontiers of Learning, the Universal House of Justice refers to these initiatives as "advancing the process of entry by troops":

> It represents the latest in a series of documents that have been issued, beginning in 1998, to provide a broad overview of the progress being made across the globe in advancing the process of entry by troops.

If we don't know the purpose, how then will we ever know if what we are doing is effective? how will we ever measure our efforts either qualitatively or quantitatively? how do we measure success or that it has been achieved? or if we are on the right track? if it turns out that we are off the mark, then what?

While it is superficially presented for the most part as a 'community development' exercise, it really isn't about that. It is, when we get down to it, about growing enrollments into the Baha'i community. Whatever answer we settle on, the truth of the matter is that it has crowded out all other activities in Baha'i communities around the world. In fact, all other teaching efforts are ignored in lieu of Ruhi.

Addressing such concerns, the Secretariat responded on October 31st 2002:

> Dear Baha'i Friend,
>
> In reply to your email of 23 October 2002 to the Universal House of Justice, we have been asked to convey the following. It is not possible, given all of the instructions and exhortations addressed to the believers by Baha'u'llah, Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi, that the House of Justice would ever advise communities that are free to pursue teaching plans that it was not timely to talk about such efforts and enrol new Baha'is. Nor could it, contrary to Baha'u'llah's explicit command, allow any other activity in the Baha'i community to diminish the responsibility of individuals to teach the Cause. Precisely the opposite is true. A major object of the recent emphasis on establishing training institutes is to increase the capacity of individuals to teach the Cause effectively. Study circles, which are local extensions of an institute, are intended to serve this purpose. While it is highly desirable to include seekers in study circles wherever possible, the individual believer retains the inescapable duty to teach the Faith on his or her own initiative. Anyone who carefully reads the messages of the House of Justice will find that it has consistently exhorted and encouraged individuals to teach the Faith, pointing to the many possibilities of exploiting the opportunities that the turmoil of the present age provides. In this regard, there is abundant evidence from countries around the world, including the United States, that the institutions of the Faith at all levels and institutes through their courses focus attention on the importance of teaching.

> The friends should not allow discussions that go on in the community to confuse or divert them from what has always been a clear understanding of their individual responsibility for teaching the Cause of God. The unfortunate consequence of so much discussion about teaching is that the friends often talk themselves out of taking action, when this is clearly a matter in which action speaks louder than words. Indeed, it is always time to teach the Faith and enrol new believers.
>
> We are to assure you of the prayers of the House of Justice in the Holy Shrines on your behalf that your individual efforts to teach the Faith may be divinely confirmed.
>
> With loving Baha'i greetings,
>
> Department of the Secretariat

This reminds me of the exhortation to humility that Priscilla wrote about before.

It strikes me as rather odd and perhaps a bit disingenuous to say that the individual teaching methods and initiatives are valid and should be respected when in actuality the very opposite is being implemented by the institutions all over the world.

In reality the video, Frontiers of Learning, which showcases the experience and success of four example communities has been set as the focal point of reflection and consultation for the world-wide Baha'i community and the most important item on the agenda of the National Spiritual Assembly members at the international Baha'i convention in Haifa; it is referred to in the annual NawRuz statement: "A vibrant training institute functions as the mainstay of the community's efforts to advance the Plan". As well, the release of the supplementary document, Insights from the Frontiers of Learning; not to mention the plethora of letters over the years outlining Ruhi and placing it as the highest priority of all Baha'i communities. And that this has even seeped into the social action efforts directed by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Baha'i World Centre.

The real message is clear, "Keep calm and Ruhi on".

“Kind of Like a Theme Park… But a Holy One”

The recent completion of the renovation of the Shrine of the Bab has lead to Time magazine to feature a short article on the Baha’i World Center in Haifa and its gardens:

> Stepping into the gardens of the Shrine of the Bab is like entering a hallucination. They rise in steps all the way up the mountainside above Haifa’s downtown, and at the midway point, at midmorning, the clear light off the Mediterranean combines with the precise efforts of 150 gardeners to achieve a combination of lucid depth and dazzling color.

The Little Religion That Persists: The Baha’i in Israel

The Time magazine journalist talks to Rob Weinberg who is one of the BWC’s external communication people as well as to several regular people visiting the gardens.

Jonas Mejer, a student visiting from Copenhagen says:

> “It’s kind of like a theme park, where they’re keeping everything ‘just so’.?But it’s a holy place.”

I chuckled after reading that because it displays a child-like innocence and honesty. My own impression after visiting the gardens was that they were maintained and manicured to an inch of their lives.

From afar they were much more beautiful than from up close. It is difficult to explain or perhaps I lack the eloquence of Jonas but there was a cosmetic vibe to it that didn’t sit well with me. I suppose the House of Justice is only trying to maintain the high standards set by Shoghi Effendi when he, with his own hands, created the gardens with much effort and sacrifice.

You won’t have to look far to guess what one of my most favorite spots was in the gardens (look up!).

Here is a short video from August 2010 from CNN.com talking with Rob Weinberg:

LA Study Class Newsletter [#28]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

This newsletter is quite interesting as it contains a lot of statistical data on the Baha'i community of the United States. It has a summary of the 59th National Convention with data on the number of Baha'is, assemblies, as well as information on the Baha'i budget and funds for that year. It may be enlightening to compare these with the most recent National Convention.

Here are some highlights: back then there were 71,189 Baha'is (of those, 1,844 without administrative rights). With 2,242 enrollments during the year (down appx. 1,000 from the previous Baha'i year) and 605 withdrawals of membership. Comparing these numbers to the most recent data, we see a massively negative picture both in absolute and relative numbers.

In the most recent Baha'i year, enrollments were 872 with 369 withdrawals of membership. **This not only represents a two thirds reduction from 1978 but also an increase in relative withdrawals (compared to enrollments) from 27% to 42%**. That is back then 27% of enrollments withdrew while today 42% did so – keep in mind that this is just a statistical measure and not indicative that the percentage of people that left were necessarily the same as those that entered the community.

In this Convention it was also reported that the NSA would purchase what has become its permanent seat in Evanston. Also, don't miss the report about the Hand of the Cause of God, Mr. William Sears at the Convention.

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]

[private home address]
Los Angeles, California
July 15th, 1978

Dear Baha'i Friends:

The study class (which still has no official name) met again on June 4th at the home of Tony Lee, whose address appears above. Since Robert Ballenger was not able to be present, Tony took a few random notes on the proceedings. The official topic of the class was to be a critical discussion of Robert Hatcher's essay *The Metaphorical Nature of Physical Reality* which has been published in Etudes Baha'i Studies and in a recent issue of World Order. However, the actual discussion ranged far and wide.

We first discussed the present state of the class itself and its prospects for the future (which, unfortunately, do not look very good). Several of the key members of the class are leaving the Los Angeles area and are leaving the country also. Mehrdad Amanat is in Iran for the summer. Chris and Jon Hendershot are planning to move to Venezuela next month. Tony Lee hopes to go to Kenya in the fall. Et cetera. On top of that, we have been having great difficulty obtaining topics for more classes. We have relied heavily on guest speakers recently adn we are simply running out of them. The time and effort required for class members to present well-researched classes seems to be just too much for most of us. So, dear readers, we may be nearing the end of the line. Watch out for signs up ahead warning of a dead end.

METAPHORS AND REALITY

The class found difficulty sticking to the topic of the metaphorical nature of physical reality or the lack of same. Our discussion was free and we talked about everything from abortion and unwed motherhood to capital punishment. But, when we were discussing Dr. Hatcher's essay we approached it with some caution. Everyone agreed that it is a brilliant piece of work. It is extremely provocative and original in concept and can only be a joy to read. It opens new areas of discussion on the Baha'i approach to reality and life and is a welcome relief from the same old rehash of ideas whcih is so common.

Our caution stemmed from wondering just how seriously we should take Dr. Hatcher's arguments about the intent of God in bringing into being this created world. His perspective is, to say the least, broad. Should we literally think of the world as a metaphor?

Or, is that itself just a metaphor, an instructive tool for thinking about things — not to be taken literally? And, isn't the whole argument rather circular?

Well, our discussions really didn't get very far and so there is little more to say. The subject is still open and could easily form the topic of another class.

A REPORT FROM THE AMERICAN NATIONAL CONVENTION

The 59th annual National Baha'i Convention took place in Wilmette and Evanston, Illinois, from May 25 to 28. Class member Bob Ballenger attended the soiree, representing the Hermosa Beach Baha'i Community. Here is his summation of the proceeding:

At Ridvan, a nationwide telephone check tallied the existence of 1,004 local assemblies in the continental United States. However, the final election reports showed the lost assemblies (60) lead advances (new: 23; restored:24), and we wound up with about 993 LSA's. In his reading of the annual report to the delegates at [the] convention, NSA secretary Glenford Mitchell, said there are about 400 Baha'i groups with five or mroe adult members in them. It is on these large groups that efforts will be concentrated as the American Baha'i community strives to attain its goal of 1,400 spiritual assemblies on the homefront by Ridvan 1979.

(One report, from a member of the California Regional Teaching Committee, had it that "a couple of hundred" of these large groups had nine or more members — but had failed to form at Ridvan. Ballenger asked Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh of the NSA about this. Dr. Kazemzadeh confirmed the existence of some such groups, but said he did not think there were a couple of hundred. He explained that some such large groups were formed as teh result of street teaching campaigns and, in some areas, people came into the Faith who now simply could not be located. He added that the movement of 500-600 Baha'is on the homefront could insure victory for the plan.)

Of the roughly 1,000 assemblies in the states, 201 of them exist in California. At a meeting, during the convention, of the California Baha'is representing local assemblies, it was pointed out that had it not been for out lost assemblies, we would have already made our 1,400 nationwide assembly goal. By the end of the Five Year Plan, California is to have 265 assemblies, an addition of 53 assemblies with no losses. (Illinois has not had a lost assembly in two years.) By way of comparison, it was pointed out that the Faith in California has grown from 30 to 201 local assemblies in only 25 years.

Current statistics: There are (as of March/April figures) 70,055 Baha'is in the continental United States, plus another 1,844 Baha'is who are without administrative rights, for a total of 71,189 on the rolls. During the last year (April 1977 to April 1978) there were 2,242 enrollments, a figure that is down about 1,000 from the previous year. (In addition, 310 American Baha'is died and another 605 withdrew from membership.) There are about 7,000 Baha'i youth in the states, but only 3,000 to 5,000 of these have known addresses. This is down considerably from a few years ago.

BUDGET

Dr. Dorothy Nelson, the national treasurer recommended, and the convention accepted, a new budget of $4 million, up $400,000 from last year's $3.6 million. With more than 70,000 Baha'is on the rolls, it works out to just over $57 per Baha'i for the year to make that goal. Contributions from the previous year amounted to only $2.94 million, $560,000 short of the annual goal. However, the National Fund received $588,000 in estate bequests. By holding actual expenditures to only 93% of the amount budgeted, and adding in the bequests, the NSA managed to avoid a deficit and end the year about $25,000 ahead.

ELECTION RESULTS

There were 171 delegates eligible to vote in the National Assembly election. Of that amount, 157 did so in person and another 11 by mail, for a total of 168. Three delegates did not vote. As a result of this balloting, (surprise!) the same nine National Assembly members were elected. Here, in order of the votes they received is the membership list: Soo Fouts (153), Dorothy Nelson (150), Dan Jordan (138), Franklin Khan (128), Glenford Mitchell (127), Firuz Kazemzadeh (120), James Nelson (104), Magdalene Carney (102), Richard Betts (89). The election of officers on the assembly produced these results: Chairman: Dan Jordan, Vice Chairman: James Nelson, Treasurer: Dorothy Nelson, Secretary: Glendord Mitchell, Assistant Secretary: Magdalene Carney (who replaced Soo Fouts at this post). And, a new office was created this year and Soo Fouts was elected special assistant secretary for teaching.

The tenor of the convention itself wavered somewhere between a sales meeting and a church revival. Remarks such as those Dan Jordan made when he said "the whole of mankind is at a crossroads and we're directing traffic" were fairly common. On another occasion, it was said that if the Baha'is are to renew themselves spiritually, "every cell is

going to belong to Baha'u'llah and the Five Year Plan." If you like that kind of talk, you would have loved the convention. While there were a number of spiritual highs, it also ought to be noted that the quality of consultation was ragged. In fact, consultation in the sense of agreement on the facts and ascertainment of the underlying spiritual principles never existed.

An inordinate amount of time was expended, for example, on the relatively minor issue of whether an "official" set of convention notes ought to be kept. This issue arose when one delegate complained that last year's convention highlights excluded much of what occurred. He wanted access to an official set of convention notes to share as part of his report to the constituency he represented. Dan Jordan, the acting chairman of the convention, responded that the problem with "official" notes was their inaccuracy. Past notes have listed motions as having passed when they did not, and, in general, were of varying quality and accuracy. Delegates discussed the issue, which is to say they argued about it, re-stating the problem and generally got nowhere. The proposal finally went down to defeat.

It was annonced at the convention that the National Assembly is spending $2.5 million to purchase an office building in Evanston to serve as the administrative headquarters of the Faith in the United States. Offices now scattered in six or eight various locations will be consolidated in this building.

In another bit of building news, it was learned, although not announced at the convention, that the bottom steps at the House of Worship were never constructed as a single, integrated unit with the rest of the House of Worship. As a result, the expansion-contraction cycle of summer and winter in Wilmette has meant that a steady round of repair work on the deck of the Temple has to be undertaken. The deck area is constantly buckling and is even hazardous in some areas. One estimated cost to correct the problem: About $2 million, or roughly as much as it cost to erect the entire House of Worship in the first place.

By special request, a portion of the convention was given over to the topic of divorce. Dr. Jeff Marke of the National Center was asked for his views on the topic. He said, although he has no figures comparing Baha'i divorce with that of the national average, there seems to be no significant difference between the two. Marks noted that there seems to be a disproportionate divorce rate among Baha'i couples in their 20′s, which indicates that Baha'i youth have no real understanding of what Baha'i marriage means. Many marriages

between Baha'is collapse for shallow reasons of boredom or a feeling that the spark has evaporated from the relationship. Marks said the only valid grounds for Baha'i divorce is deep personal aversion amounting to antipathy, repugnance and loathing. Too often, he noted, local Assemblies function as passive partners in marital breakup, handling Baha'i year of patience cases as routine events, recording them but making no real effort to affect a reconciliation between couples.

The highlight of the convention was the appearance on Saturday night, May 27, of Hand of the Cause of God Mr. William Sears. He spoke at a special outdoor dinner held on the lawn of the National Hazira[tu'l-Quds], across the street from the House of Worship on teh lakefront property owned by the Faith. A huge blue and white tent had been erected for the occasion. And, as the breeze from the lake cooled off the end of a hot, muggy day, Mr. Sears began by reminding his listeners that, when Abdu'l-Baha laid the cornerstone of the House of Worship, that meeting was also held in a tent. Similarly, the cornerstone ceremony for the House of Worship in Kampala, Uganda also was held under a tent. At one point during His life in the Holy Land, Baha'u'llah pitched His tent on the side of Mt. Carmel.

Surveying the audience, Mr. Sears said, "They tell me this is a victory tent, and this is a victory convention. I hope that the spirit of all these tents will rub off on us tonight." He urged the Baha'is to unite and win the goals because, as Shoghi Effendi said, the Baha'is have to get better as the world turns worse and so far, things are getting worse faster than we are getting better. Noting that the American Baha'i community was seriously lagging in reaching its Five Year Plan homefront goals, Mr. Sears said the situation reminded him of a story he ehard about two Irishmen caught up in the events of the French Revolution. They were arrested and sentenced to die by beheading. They did not discuss their fate with each other until the day of their execution, when both men were laid out, side by side, on twin guillotines. As the blades were released and dropped toward their necks, one Irishman turned to the other and said, "Now here's my plan…" Mr. Sears paused while the audience roared with laughter and said "And, that's the status of the homefront."

IN THE MAIL

We got a letter from Peter Smith of Lancaster, England, commenting on our analysis of his paper *The Routinization of Charisma: Some Comments on Peter L. Berger's 'Motif Messianique et Processus Social dans le Bahaisme'* (March 1978 Newsletter). He writes:

“I wonder if I might be allowed a couple of comments on the class discussion of my The Routinization of Charisma paper.

Firstly, a correction. The point about the messianic motif is not that it faded in importance in the period after Baha’u’llah (as stated in the class report), but that it became transformed. In the paper I distinguish between two aspects of the ‘messianic motif’: expectation of a messianic figure and expectation of a millenium. There seems every reason to suppose that the early Babis (a similarity here to the early Christians) expected that the coming of the Bab heralded the near advent of the millenium. In contrast, later Baha’is distinguished between the period when their messiah figures came (The Heroic Age) and the future period of the millenium (The Golden Age, The Most Great Peace). The period we are now in (The Formative Age) is seen by Baha’is as linking these two: using the spiritual impetus of the former to establish the latter. The strong emphasis given by Baha’is to the shortcomings of the present age and the need to build a New World Order are a testimony to the continuing importance of the messianic motif. The bulk of the Baha’i teaching endeavour would seem to centre on this concept and much of the rationale for various Baha’i activities (eg establishing LSA’s) is presented in terms of preparing for the future World Order.

Secondly, to defend myself against the charge of ‘Babi bias’ (ie that the analysis is more suggestive for Babi history than it is for Baha’i), as you correclty state the ‘esoteric-gnostic’ motif is no longer of much importance (although there may be certain aspects which might be due for a revivial) which leaves the other three motifs: polar (The Covenant); messianich (work towards a future World Order); and legalistic (the development of Baha’i Law and Administration) as the characteristic features of the Baha’i religion in the modern period. I would argue that this is precisely the case. In contrast to the Heroic Age and the early part of the Formative Age (the establishment of the Administrative Order) when a complex relationship existed between the various motifs and dramatic changes in their development occured, the modern period has been far more stable, the great changes which have occurred in the Faith since the 1930′s can all be more easily conceptualized as changes within these three motifs rather than any actual change in motifs.

Bearing in mind that motifs are only analytical constructs, aids for conceptualizing complex historical processes, you could always run a motif-spotting competition, of

course. Say, one free copy of the Hermosa Beach Bulletin for every fresh motif identified in Baha'i history — Second prize: Two copies."

AND MORE LETTERS

Ron Carrigan of Santa Monica writes:

"… let me make a few observations about the newsletter and the class. I have had a wealth of positive reaction to both over these past several months. Howeer, I must echo the sentiments of a recent correspondent to the Editor who suggested that there seems at times to be an air of cynicism and sarcasm toward the Faith and its institutions. For example, I have had two very negative reactions to two comments made in the newsletter. One was in the last issue, it was mentioned that in the initial days of the Five Year Plan, Baha'is had behaved in a 'blitzkrieg'-like manner with regard to teaching activities. In additon to the authors poor judgement in these word choices, there is an irony about the thinking invovled. The Faith is so opposed to the use of guns and violence, that linking it to such become a tasteless derision. I am sure the author can do better."

AND THE NEXT CLASS…

We are lucky enough to have Loni Bramson in town for a few weeks. Ms. Bramson is doing her doctorate in Religious Studies in Belgium where she is also a pioneer. Her dissertation will be on some aspect of the development of the Baha'i Faith under the Guardianship. She has recently completed two weeks of research in the National Baha'i Archives in Wilmette. She will speak to the class about her work and may be able to giv eus some news of the Five Year Plan in Europe.

The class will be held at 2:00 pm at the home of Tony Lee [private address follows] on Sunday, July 23rd. Please try to be there.

[END DOCUMENT]

Related Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Class Newsletter [#29]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:
This LA Class newsletter is interesting because it contains the research of Ms. Loni Bramson-Lerche. A quick search on the internet found this paper she wrote in "Studies in Babi and Baha'i History", titled: Some Aspects of the Development of the Baha'i Administrative Order in America.

She presents her preliminary research resultson Horace Holley, NSA secretary and in his era, the most prominent member of the American Baha'i community. I had already read from other Baha'i theologians that Holley played a pivotal role, as secretary of the NSA, in forming the community and making decisions. The impression given was that he had an autocratic streak. But what Ms. Bramson reveals is even beyond this.

The newsletter also contains information about an upcoming Baha'i Studies seminar to be held in Cambridge, UK.

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]

[private home address]
Hermosa Beach, California 90254
August 3, 1978

Newsletter
Vol. III, No. 7

Dear Friends,

Well, much to everyone's surprise yet another issue of the class newsletter is being sent out. The study group is still on shaky ground, however, especially where finances are

concerned. This mailing will use up our last few dollars. Our mailing list has grown quite large and of course, subscribers outside of the United States have not (so far) been asked to pay. Since we do not know how many issues of this newsletter will see the light, we are reluctant to ask for more subscriptions. But, if any of you out there (especially the overseas folks) would like to make a voluntary donation to our worthy cause, please send same to the above address made out to Anthony Lee. Otherwise, we are broke.

Baha'i Studies Seminar, Cambridge — Sept. 30 – Oct. 1

The last page of this newsletter reproduces information on the Seminar on Baha'i Studies organized by some English Baha'is doing academic work on the Baha'i Faith which will be held later this year. You will note that you may obtain a copy of the seminar report (notes on the proceedings) for just 50p (about $1). We hope that many of our readers will take advantage of this opportunity and that some of you will even be inspired to attend in person. Remember, air fares are cheap nowadays!

LONI BRAMSON'S PRESENTATION

At our last class we had the pleasure of having Loni Bramson give a presentation on her work on her doctoral dissertation and her research is the National Baha'i Archives in Wilmette. Ms. Bramson has been a pioneer to Belgium for the last four years. She is currently studying at the Catholic Univerity of Louvain, majoring in contemporary history. Her dissertation will be on the history of the Baha'i Faith. She is focusing on the early years of the Guardianship, from about 1921 to 1937. It will be concerned with the transformation which Shoghi Effendi wrought in the Baha'i community during those years and the opposition which he faced within that community. Before coming to Los Angeles, Ms. Bramson spent two weeks during research in Wilmette.

Ms. Bramson explained to the class that it seems that within the last two or three years Baha'i Studies in Europe has really begun to take off. She named several Baha'is and one or two non-Baha'is who are doing academic work on the Baha'i Faith in England, France, Austria and elsewhere. She estimated that there may be ten scholars now doing graduates work on some area of Baha'i Studies. She pointed to the two seminars which have been held at the University of Lancaster (under the direction of Peter Smith) and the one whcih will soon be held at Cambridge. The hope is that these seminars, sponsored by academic institutions will help to give Baha'i Studies a "stamp of academic approval."

Ms. Bramson also noted that there has been a revival of interest in the Babi Faith generally in academic circles. Recent books written by non-Baha'is have dealt with this subject extensively. Our speaker expressed the hope that these developments would one day lead to the teaching of courses on the Babi and Baha'i Faiths at major universities around the world.

Anthony Lee suggested that there may not be a real upsurge of Baha'i Studies in Europe, but rather an upsurge in communication between scholars doing this kind of work. He guessed that there must be more Baha'is doing academic research on aspects of the Faith in the United States than there are in Europe, but that the American scholars are lamentably out of touch with one another.

Dr. Amin Banani asked for a definition for a definition of "Baha'i Studies." Loni responded that she felt that anyone doing graduate or post-graduate research at a university on some aspect of the Baha'i Faith was involved in Baha'i Studies. This is a loose term which applies to a wide area.

At this point, Dr. Banani asked an interesting and pointed question. How do the Baha'is who are presently studying the Faith on an academic level in Europe see themselves, especially in relation to earlier Baha'i scholars? How do they see the work that they are doing in relationship to the work which has gone before, for instance the work of Mirza Abu'l-Fazl [Ed. alt. spelling Mirza Abu'l-Fadl]? are they continuing in a tradition or are they starting a new tradition?

Loni replied that she felt that the scholars studying today were aware of the past and saw themselves in some way carrying on a tradition. However, Anthony Lee objected that he felt that Baha'is studying the Faith in Europe today very much saw themselves as a new breed. Though they may be aware of the scholarship which has gone before, they see themselves as distinctly different from Baha'i scholars of the past… more detached, more "scientific", perhaps, more "objective". They are not acting as apologists for the Faith, but as detached academics.

Loni admitted that she could not speak for the other Baha'is studying the Faith in Europe, but that her work at least is something new. There has been no academic work or serious research done on the Ministry of Shoghi Effendi. One reason that she picked that field was that it is untouched.

Dr. Banani was asked to clarify his point. He replied that he felt that the consciousness of any group of intellectuals who see themselves as breaking new ground must include their own relationship to the past. Part of any "scientific method" must be a firm knowledge of the intellectual history of one's field. He wondered how equipped present Baha'i scholars are to see themselves in the history of Baha'i scholarship? Can they really see where they stand? Others objected that it really may not be fair to ask where present scholars stand in relation to history? Does anyone know where he stands? Can he see himself that clearly? And besides, it is probably too soon to say.

Our speaker explained that one reason that Baha'is have been drawn to enter Baha'i Studies on an academic level is their desire to rid the Faith of misinformation which is commonly passed around and believed Baha'is. She explained that she was partially motivated by that reason. For instance, Baha'is often say that there is no ritual or dogma in the Baha'i faith. But, this is simply untrue. There is plenty of both. [Ed. Hand written note: "Can't say this unless you define terms! SR]

One class member wondered if there are really major adjustments to be made in our understanding of the Baha'i Faith. Are Baha'i scholars really liable to change the way we look at things, say, fifty or hundred years from now? Several Baha'is thought that the answer is decidedly "yes". Moreover, they maintained, the whole Baha'i Faith is changing. After all, the way Baha'is say the Faith fifty or one-hundred years ago has changed drastically.

Ms. Bramson pointed out that one of the problems with doing work on the Faith at a Catholic University is the lack of supervision and assistance from professors. Both of her supervisors are Catholic priests who, know next to nothing about the Baha'i Faith. They have simply left her alone and she has had to seek guidance from within the Baha'i Community. Even here there is little help.

Dr. Banani suggested that is probably better for Baha'is to take up Baha'i Studies after they have already obtained a higher degree in some other field. There is a general lack of supervision and sympathy on the part of one's superiors. Beyond this there are positive hindrances. Most non-Baha'i scholars will be suspicious of the motives and objectivity of any Baha'i who is studying his own religion, scientific method notwithstanding. After one has proved himself in a neutral field, then he can enter the arena of Baha'i Studies with firm academic credentials.

Ms. Bramson explained to the class that her work had gone through a number of stages. She first intended to do a doctoral thesis on the history of the Faith during the stewardship of the Hands of the Cause —1957-1963. She wrote to the House of Justice concerning this matter and they wrote back to her suggesting that she not use this as the topic of her thesis. They gave no reason. The Rouse also expressed concern that she was going to do work on the Faith at such an eminent Catholic University and asked her to work closely with her LSA and the Counsellor for her area. Loni said that she is happy that she did not pursue her topic on the Hands of the Cause since she feels that too little time has elapsed to give us a proper perspective on those years.

Ms. Branson introduced the class to the work which she had done in the National Baha'i Archives by reading a statement which was presented to the government by the Baha'i community shortly before the turn of the century and recorded in the United States Census of 1900. The statement made it clear that one could be a Baha'i and still be a member of another church or religion. It said that the Faith had no organization of its own, but that it as spread through meetings called "Assemblies" which were open to all who wished to attend. This statement was repeated in the U.S. Census of 1920, apparently with the permission of the Baha'is.

Our speaker explained that the Faith was in this unstructured state at the time that Shoghi Effendi became the Guardian and that he transformed the community into something else. She is interested in studying the history of this transformation — how it came about, what ideas had an influence on Shoghi Effendi, what internal opposition he faced, etc.

At this point some members of the class cautioned against too great an emphasis on the unstructured nature of the Baha'i Community before 1921. They pointed out that the statement published by the Census Bureau was written only six or seven years after the Faith had been introduced into this country and when the believers were still fuzzy about its true nature. It cannot really be used as a statement of the Baha'i situation in 1920, regardless of whether or not it happened to be reprinted. The class recalled the report on Peter Smith's paper on the history of the American Baha'i Community which was given at an earlier class meeting, (See Vol.. III, No. 5.) Smith noted that there had always been a faction of the Baha'i Community which was interested in organization and structure. It was true that there was also a part of the community opposed to organization, but Abdu'l-Baha had Himself given approval for a substantial transformation in the community by the time

of His ascension. So we cannot say that Shoghi Effendi was doing something entirely new when be began to construct a uniform administrative order for the Faith.

Loni acknowledged that this is true. She further noted that her research indicated that the two factions of the Baha'i Community —- the organizers and the anti-organizers — continued to exist until about 1940. By then almost all of the Baha'is had accepted the need for an Administrative Order and acknowledged its importance.

Our speaker explained that most of her research in the National Archives consisted of a study of the letters of the National Spiritual Assembly to the Guardian. These were written by Horace Holley. The letters are organized up to about 1940, so that is as far as she could go. Loni explained that Horace Holley played in the early years, carried on an extensive, almost personal, correspondence with the Guardian in the early, formative years of Baha'i Administration. She said that she was deeply impressed by the important role which Horace Holley played in the development of Baha'i Administration. It seamed to her that many of the ideas end institutions which later became part of the Administrative Order were first suggested by Holley to the Guardian. The Guardian then picked up on then ideas refined and modified them and made them part of the Baha'i Faith.

Loni cautioned that her research findings were only tentative. She has not had a chance to study her notes or to really develop firm ideas yet. In any case, her impressions were extremely interesting and useful.

Loni explained that the Archives facilities at the National Baha'i Center are still quite small. By no means is everything there organized for use by researchers. Only one archivist is employed there, Mr. Roger Dahl. When Loni was there he was in the process of organizing the papers of Agnes Parsons.

She was able to use some materials in the Archives, but unable to see other things. The files of the International Goals Committee are closed to researchers, for instance, probably because they contain personal information about pioneers – The minutes of the National spiritual Assembly are not open. Neither are the letters of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly, primarily because they are not yet organized. Loni noted that the personal papers of Horace Holley collected in Wilmette are extremely sparse, primarily because most of his correspondence was carried on as the secretary of the National Assembly.

AND, ANOTHER LETTER FROM PETER SMITH:

"Humble apologies for once again writing to your esteemed journal with comments on your presentation of a paper given by myself. This time it's concerning the Vol. III, No. 5, May 1979 issue.

"The account is generally fine but the comments on early Baha'i factionalism grossly overstate my argument. Whilst the larger communities of Chicago and N.Y. were often badly divided by cliquishness, even they were not characterized by completely mutually antagonistic groups. The situation was one of fluidity. There were cliques and there ware tendencies towards division, but there was also co-existence and a fair degree of tolerance. The sense of common identity as followers of "Abdu'l-Baha overrode much of the division. In Chicago, where the situation was probably worst, the crunch came in 1917/18 with the allegations of Covenant-breaking and the resultant departure of one of the "factions' from the community. In the smaller communities the situation was more straightforward and united — after all, there are difficulties involved if a group of less than 20 people are divided into "5 or 6 mutually antagonistic groups.'

Advance notice: The next Lancaster seminar will be in 1979 — provisional date, April 6-8. Those wishing to attend must complete a three minute intensive training programme in how to be English (We tried to convert Tony when he was over here but I notice he's still saying that everything is "cute') and send a blank cheque to a numbered Swiss bank account."

THE NEXT CLASS

The next class will he held on Sunday, August 27th at the home of Anthony Lee, [Ed. Personal address follows]. The speaker will be Mrs. Betty Conow who will make a presentation entitled, "Hierarchies, Analogies and the Degrees of Reality: A Model."

She explains her topic in these words:

"Any serious attempt to "explain' Reality must make use of certain mental constructs, such as metaphors and similes, analogies, and in the more ambitious attempts, theoretical models. The use of hierarchic order in General Systems Theory is, in many ways, a composite of all of them. (For comparisons, think of Set Theory, Carl Hempel's "Covering Law,' Aristotle's 'Greate Chain of Being,' and "Abdu'l-Baba's "Kingdoms of God.'). A

model is offered to the class, based en "Abdu'l-Baha's, for approximating Truth, for making statements about the "really real,' and which demonstrates the inadequacies of traditional logic to encompass Ultimate Reality. It's the old saw about the part trying to extrapolate the whole.' We have to reverse the logic process. My argument is that only the Divine Teachers have knowledge of the Whole, or of the Divine World, which our created phenomenal world mirrors. By using a model, we can establish the correspondences which exist, and discover that there is only one Reality, but that it is seen and interpreted according to where the observer is positioned in the universal hierarchic order."

So, everyone be there. August 27th at 3:00 P.M. at Tony's house. We can see what we can make out of this.

[Ed. Supplemental information re the then upcoming Baha'i Studies Seminar]

BAHA'I STUDIES SEMINAR
CAMBRIDGE
30 September — 1 October, 1979
PROVISIONAL PROGRAMS

Saturday, September 30th

I. Morning Session, introduced by Peter Smith

JUSTIFICATION FOR BAHA'I STUDIES

Suggested Topics:
Are different areas more justifiable than others at present? Are there areas into which it may not be appropriate to enter now?. How can we justify the use of sensitive biographical arid other material?

2. Afternoon Session, introduced by seo5n 1(omen

METHODOLOGY OF BAHA'I STUDIES

Suggested topics:
"Baha'i' or "academic' standards? Possible variations in approach between Baha'i and non-Baha"i scholars? Discussion of the Central Figures of the Baha'i Faith. Methodological problems in cases of cooperation between Baha'i and non-Baha'i scholars. Double

standards in Baha'i and non-Baha'i work? Linguistic style and its bearing on method. The use of confidential archives of LSA's, NSA's, etcetera

Sunday, October 1st

3. Morning Session, introduced by Denis MacEoin

RELATIONS BETWEEN BAHA'I SCHOLARS AND THE BAHA'I COMMUNITY

Suggested topics:

Prejudice against scholarship and its removal. Attacks on scholars — what measujres can be taken for protection? The responsibility of scholars to other believers. The review of scholarly works for publication. The role of scholars in fixing limits on the growth of myth and legend in popular Baha'i historiography.

4. Afternoon session

WORK. IN PROGRESS

Suggested Topics:
Progress reports from individuals. Sharing ideas and problems. The production of a bibliography. Difficulties in obtaining materials in various languages. International coordination of efforts. Oral and manuscript history projects. Concrete proposals for future developments Establishment of an International Institute for Baha'i Studies.

BAHA'I STUDIES SEMINAR
CAMBRIDGE

30 September — 1 October, l97

BOOKING FORM

It is hoped to provide accommodation, possibly in College guest rooms at King's and/or John's, for those taking part. A limited amount of accommodation in private homes may be available to those booking early. The sessions will, it is hoped, take place in a suitable roan at either King's or John's College- There are several cheap but excellent restaurants (largely catering for students) in the city, and it is proposed that we eat at one of these. Those arriving on Friday evening should proceed to the MacEoin's flat, [Ed. personal

address and phone number]. It is suggested that a party go for dinner to a good restaurant (probably Strudel's) on the Saturday evening. Please fill in the form below, placing a cross against, those items which are applicable.

Baha'i Studies Seminar, Cambridge, September—October, 1978

( ) I plan to attend the seminar or. both days (Registration fee ?1)
( ) I plan to attend the seminar on Saturday only (Fee ?1)
( ) I plan to attend the seminar on Sunday only (Fee ?1)
( ) I shall be unable to attend
( ) I shall require a copy of the seminar report (Charge 50p)

( ) I wish to join the party for dinner on Saturday evening

Please return the completed form to: Denis MacEoin, 961, King's College, Cambridge by Wednesday 23rd. at the Latest. kny queries or requests for extra forms should be directed to the seine address.
The registration fee includes a 50p charge for the seminar report. Please enclose a cheque or postal order for the appropriate amount.

[END DOCUMENT]

Related Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Class Newsletter [#30]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

I found this newsletter a bit dry and boring. But maybe that's just me. Hope you enjoy it more than I did.

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]

[Ed. personal address]
"Land of the Slightly Fat"

Vol. III, No.8
August, 1970

“Hierarchies, Analogies, and Degrees of Reality: A Model," represents an ambitious effort by Betty Conow of Hacienda Heights (a town east of Los Angeles) to set out a Baha’i view of Reality. Her cosmology, based on the Baha’i Writings, presents an approach to explaining existence as an ordered system, describing what is and how it works.

Conow made her presentation to our study class on August 27, as we met in the lavishly appointed environs of Tony Lee’s apartment, renowned for its sumptuous delights including newly installed hot arid cold, running wenches. Her paper was offered to our class, partly in reaction to an earlier class discussion of John S. Hatcher’s essay "The Metaphorical Nature of Physical Reality," In that paper, originally presented to the Canadian Association for Studies on the Baha’i Faith, Hatcher outlined the reasons that mankind, which is fundamentally spiritual, should have a material plane of existence. The Conow reaction to some of Hatcher’s concepts amounted to an elaborate survey of Reality, as viewed through the vehicle of religion. She asserted that the fundamental purpose of religion is to reveal truth to humanity which it does by showing mankind how to understand Reality.

Here, is a summary of her presentation: (The attached charts and short statement were passed out during the course of the class.)

Once we know the reality of things, we can understand what truth is. Truth is those statements made about the condition of reality. And, Reality is all that exists potentially, presently or in the past. There are two ways of considering reality. One is man’s way, that is, from within the system of the universe as part of it. The other lies outside the system, and it is God’s way. Human knowledge uses its own criteria, learned through intellectual discovery, to judge reality. Religion, however, establishes a different standard.

This presents a formidable problem, especially in contemporary philosophy. For instance, two twentieth-century thinkers, Kurt Godel, a German scientist, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, an Austrian philosopher, both argued that the language we use to discuss Reality itself limits our inquiry.

Wittgenstein, for example, wrote that when men wish to discuss a concept, say, a chair, they do so not by considering the chair, but through the use of language to describe the object. The use of language involves symbolic representations. And these representations themselves limit the field of inquiry. Wittgenstein argued, therefore, that it is not possible for man to look outside the system in which he lives because his language — the tools of his exploration — limit him in finite terms.

Conow challenged that assertion, countering that one of the roles of the Manifestation of God is to present an "outside view of reality, one that is not constrained by human limitations, riot the limited proofs the mind of man can muster. Her thesis has it that religion, even from ancient times, has presented Reality as existing in various degrees or, as she called them, hierarchies, which stem from one Source which we call God.

Her theme was not an easy one to follow. Consider this passage from the pr?�cis she presented to the class: "The created universe of existence, being composed of matter, reflects Reality on different levels, depending upon which material level each created thing occupies in the cosmic hierarchic order. Each level or hierarchy can reflect only certain aspects of Reality dictated by the laws of that particular hierarchy. We, from the vantage point of our own limited conditions, occupy a unique hierarchy which is simultaneously both the lowest and the highest of all Hierarchies. At our level, Reality is the most differentiated, thereby presenting us with an enigma which speaks both of Oneness and its Appearances.

"Science and philosophy interpret these multiplicities as the standard of Truth whereby all truth and knowledge can be known. The material, visible world encloses us in logic based on probabilities and relativities. inside the system, we define it only by the criteria the system itself provides.

Conow’s presentation continued with a section on analogies and. hierarchies. Reality exists within a setting Like a series of Chinese puzzle boxes, each level lodged within a larger level. This order of things resembles the set Theory of science which holds that everything

that exists operates in obedience to the rules of a system. For instance, an atom functions within a system which itself is part of a larger system o the molecule, and so on up the line.

Although mankind is part of this system, human knowledge of it can transcend the limits of the levels through the Manifestation. The Prophet, with Divine Knowledge, understands and explains the entire system, helping man become informed of the workings of the material universe. Manifestations explain the Divine workings by using analogy and symbolism in their language. The purpose of such indirect language is to open up humanity's inner consciousness. Language is not used so much to communicate ideas as it is wielded to achieve a spiritual reflect on the reader.

The model of Reality presented in the Baha'i Faith amounts to a recasting of an older religious model, connecting the finite, material world to the infinite. In an attempt to demonstrate this link, Conow passed out a chart (see diagram) She defined "cosmos" as everything, that exists, either in potential or in reality. (This definition struck one member of the class as being disturbingly close to the definition of Reality.) Within the cosmos is the material universe. God, she said, exists within the cosmos as a Creative Force, a Fashioner of all that is, and outside of it as an unknowable Essence. God than has a "Hidden Aspect", which we can be told of but do not know of, and a "Manifest Aspect", the evidences of which exist as the created, material universe.

Our discussion of Mrs. Conow's presentation proved to be somewhat of a frustrating experience, for her as well as for the class members. For example, on her chart, Conow placed "The Reality of Realities" outside the cosmos. But she had, in response to a question, defined the cosmos as everything, all potential and all that exists. A similar definition had been given to "Reality." So then, it was asked, how could there be a separate "Reality of Realities" outside of what she already defined as Reality? And what would such a thing be, anyhow? Conow said that the term "Reality of Realities" was used by Abdu'l-Baha, but failed to explain its place in the scheme of things or why she chose to include it as part of her chart.

A similar collapse in communication occurred over the concept of what she called "The Inner Path of Mysticism," Linking certain enlightened men to God. (See chart.) Essentially, this mystic path is one taken by religious devotees and mystics in an effort to attain unity with God. It is an important concept in Sufi lsam. Baha'u'llah's work, The Seven Valleys, which traces the journey of the soul back to its Creator, uses the Sufi model of seven

stages. Mystics of all stripes, Sufis, Buddhists and the rest, all have claimed to have taken this path (using whatever means their religion prescribed) to attain oneness with God. Baha'is do not believe that such union with divinity is possible. As such it is not possibe to transcend finite limitations to attain a meeting with the infinite.

Still, such a path exists on Conow's chart and it appears that it leads directly to God. If such is the case, she was asked, why bother with all the rest. What is the use or the Manifestations? Conow replied that, though mystics believe that they have encompassed the whole cosmos within themselves, they have only traveled the path, which is just a small part of the cosmos. So, what is "the path"? And, if it lends directly to God, why bother with anything else?

Class members received no satisfactory answer to this question, partly because Conow said that she did not wish to become trapped in Wittgenstein's paradox — being hampered by the limits of language used in an argument. In essence, it appeared that she was unwilling to get into an intellectual analysis of her elaborate system. In particular she felt that a precise definition of terms was inappropriate. That, she implied, would eliminate any possibility of understanding what lies outside the material system because the meanings of words torpedo such an exercise.

When her refusal to talk in specifics became clear, discussion was impossible. The Conow thesis was presented on what amounted to a "take it or leave it" basis. At least some of the class members chose the latter course.

ABOUT TRANSITIONS

Our valued class members, Jon and Chris Hendershot have left the Los Angeles area and are pioneering in Venezuela. We wish then well and miss them, especially Chris, who patiently typed up and proofread these newsletters. She denies that an overwhelming desire to escape the tedium of such activities played a major role in the decision to go pioneering.

BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

Tony Lee, our class leader, has forsaken his life of posh lassitude to become a partner in the newly created publishing firm of "Kalimat Press" based in Los Anqeles. Actually, the company is a partnership between Tony and one other Baha'i. The object of the company is to produce Baha'i-related materials. Tony and his partner feel that an alternative to the

Baha'i Publishing Trust in Wilmette is needed in the United States (similar to George Ronald in England).

Right now the company is working on Baha'i children's materials. But if there are any good manuscripts floating around out there in need of a Baha'i publisher, their starry-eyed authors might write to Kalimat Press, [Ed. business address follows]. (Remember: It never hurts budding authors to be obsequious.)

YES THERE WILL BE A NEXT CLASS:

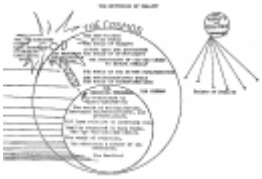
Dr. Daniel Jordan, member and chairman at the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, recently moved to California with his family. His Anisa program, an approach to education based on Baha'i principles, has moved with him. At our next class Dr. Jordan will speak about Anisa and the Baha'i view of childhood education.

The class will be held. on Saturday evening, September 23rd at 8 P.M. at the home of Sidney and Karan Morrison. The address is: [Ed. personal address and telephone follows]

See you all there !

HIERARCHIES, ANALOGIES, THE DEGREES OF REALITY
A MODEL

Click to make bigger:



Click to make bigger:

This presentation covers two ways of looking at Reality–from inside our system, or man's way and from outside the system, God's Way, or Revealed Religion. The mainstream of Revealed Religion and the ancient religious traditions have all presented Reality as existing

in degrees, gradients, or hierarchies, emanating from the Undifferentiated Whole as One Reality. The created universe or existence being composed of matter, reflects Reality on different levels, depending upon which material level each created thing occupies in the cosmic hierarchic order. Each level or hierarchy can reflect only certain aspects of Reality dictated by the laws of that particular hierarchy. We, from the vantage point of our own limited conditions occupy a unique hierarchy which is simultaneously both the lowest and the highest of all hierarchies. At our level, Reality is the most differentiated thereby presenting us with an enigma which speaks both of Oneness and Appearances, Science and philosophy interpret these multiplicities as the standard of Truth whereby all truth and knowledge can be known. The material, visible world encloses us In logic based on probabilities and relativities. Inside the system, we define it only by the criteria the system itself provides.

If the Holy Teachers did not exist, there would be no way to make any statements about anything outside our system. All knowledge of the non-visible or the Divine Spiritual World comes from these Holy Beings. They alone experienced, lived in, and shared with humanity the living Reality behind all realities. With knowledge from that World They were able to establish the relationships and correspondences that exist between the Spiritual World and the created universe of phenomena, They explained the motions, the energies, and the forces which manifest themselves eternally as Universal Laws in both worlds. Through Their religions they balance our laws as social beings so that the two-worlds may be in harmony and connected,

8/22/78
Betty Conow

[END DOCUMENT]

Related Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Class Newsletter [#31]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

This newsletter contains a summary of the presentation of Dr. Daniel Jordan on ANISA – a framework for education. Unfortunately, Dr. Jordan's life was cut short by murder approximately four years from this LA class presentation; which left ANISA without a champion.

ANISA sounds very promising and it is most tragic that its founders' life was so untimely cut. Who knows what it may have flowered into had it been given a chance? Searching on the internet, there are a few people (no doubt associates and partners of Dr. Jordan) who are continuing to work along similar lines. If you wish to learn more about Dr. Daniel C. Jordan, here is a biography written 10 years after his death.

It also bears highlighting that Dr. Jordan was inspired by Baha'i principles and values but that the framework that he developed was based not truly based on them. This is a limiting factor that I've seen in Baha'is of all fields – they automatically assume that the Baha'i Faith contains the answer for their field… be it agriculture, biology, commerce, etc…

The Faith is beautiful but it isn't everything. Baha'i specialists may start with the Writings but to corral oneself inside them and insist that nothing else outside is of value is devastating. Sadly I've seen many Baha'is take this approach and their projects suffer for it. The Baha'i Faith can't be wrangled and coerced to give answers to everything under the sun. Do you really think that God would make things as simple as that?

Or provide some sort of infallible oracle to which one can put all questions for the final answer?

Finally Dr. Jordan's comment on Baha'i pioneers is interesting. His prediction hasn't become reality but it is true that people are skeptical if all you offer is to preach. They've had enough of that. Especially in poverty stricken countries. What they need are real answers and solutions which are borne out of the seed of Faith that pioneers take with them.

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]

[Ed. personal address]
Hermosa Beach, California 90254
October, 1978
Volume III, No. 9

Most of us went to school under an educational system that functioned as a kind of crude computer theory. Students, like machines, it was believed, could be programmed with knowledge by stuffing their heads full of facts — the multiplication tables, important dates in history, the parts of speech, etc. This approach to leaning is based on the notion that students are empty vessels, in school to be filled with a universe of knowledge. It has always found greater acceptance among educators than educatees.

But suppose that someone developed a theory of education that was less concerned with instilling some state-approved curriculum into the heads of pupils; but was more attuned to the development of the students' inherent potential? In fact, such an event has already taken place and, at the September meeting of our study class, some 50 people crowded into the home of Sid and Karan Morrison to hear about it.

The speaker was Dr. Daniel Jordan, chair of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, discussing ANISA, a unique educational program he has developed over the last 18 years. In a lecture lasting more than two hours and representing "only the tip of the iceberg," as Jordan termed it, he outlined what the program is and how it works. Here is a summary of his talk:

The ANISA project recently has moved to the West Coast and is now centered in Escondido, California, a city about 100 miles south of Los Angeles. ANISA was refined at the University of Massachusetts but, after a ten-year association with that institution, the program had to decamp. Its departure was occasioned partly because of a $700 million state budget deficit which threatened to end the project's funding and partly because of a restructuring of the university's academic hierarchy which forecast a limited future for the experimental model.

Jordan, the founder and program head, decided to take ANISA out of the public sector, and put it under the sponsorship of a private university — an educational institution he founded. The decision to end ANISA's association with recognized educational

establishments was not an easy one to make. When it became apparent that the program at U. Mass. faced diminishing odds, some 27 colleges and universities were sounded out about giving it a home. There was some interest, but as Jordan recalled, “Their first questions were not about the quality of the ideas but were on political issues and money.”

That was not the only problem. In a couple of cases, university officials showed interest in the ANISA program and called back to
U. Mass. for references. They were told that ANISA was a Baha’i front organization for religious proselytizing. Interest waned after such misinformation was given them, despite ANISA denials.

There is considerable confusion, especially in the minds of Baha’is, about the nature of the ANISA program. Although ANISA draws some of its inspiration from the Baha’i Writings (and less than many Baha’is believe), it is not a “Baha’i educational system”. However, Anisa is an Arabic term meaning "the tree of life" and, in a Baha’i context, has been identified by Abdu’l-Baha as symbolizing the Baha’i Covenant. In the early days of the program, the word ANISA was used as an acronym for “American National Institute for Social Advancement”. This usage seems to have been discarded now.) In the Baha’i Writings, a great emphasis is place on education, the purpose of which is to develop latent human potentials, according to Baha’u’llah. However, Baha’u’llah never specified what would constitute a proper education and Shoghi Effendi wrote that future scholars would have to figure out what such an education would entail.

When ANISA was moved to the West Coast, Jordan took over a financially ailing institution called California American University and started a Master of Science program in education at the new school. It is here that the experiment resumes.

ANISA came into being during the early 1960’ s when Jordan began wondering why the educational system all but ignored the exploration of how humans develop and learn. While new discoveries generally take about three years to penetrate the scientific community, in education, 50 years can pass before any innovative thinking makes its influence felt in the classroom. Learning in America and elsewhere has concentrated on the development of curriculum, excluding much consideration about the person to be educated. There is no fundamental statement about the nature of man [and] the direction of his development through education.

ANISA is one approach to such a system, and one that attempts to create an educational system based on spiritual, and scientific values. The initial work for creating such a system began with a survey of the Baha' i Writings regarding learning, but that was not satisfactory, for there still was not enough there on which to base an educational system. The groundwork made progress when a survey of the writings of Alfred North Whitehead, and English philosopher, turned up his observation that the success of any unified system requires a basic principle around which everything else is organized. That discovery led ANISA researchers to ask themselves what the first principle of education is. Queries to professors of education did not help much, for none of them knew what such a first principle might be and a few dismissed the importance of even having such a basic statement.

The search for a first principle led to a survey of the educational literature of the twentieth century and a tabulation of statements about the nature of man. But the search kept returning to Whitehead's writings and his musings on the nature of the Universe. Whitehead observed that when one sees the universe, what one sees is change. Change is process and it presupposes potentiality. Translating potential into actuality is creativity, the philosopher wrote. Based on this notion, the ANISA founders decided that the purpose of their system would be to translate a child's potential into actuality. That became the organizing principle.

Ironically, for a system that is designed to develop a child's potential, ANISA has never commanded enough money to run its own school. It has, for the most part, concentrated on training teachers. As Jordan explained it, what a teacher believes about a child influence how the teacher will instruct and the child will learn. "If you think that kids are mean little monsters, then you will relate to them in that way and on that basis, and help create a self-fulfilling prophecy Therefore, ANISA programs have concentrated on teaching teachers not reduce the ability of students to absorb education by patronizing or humiliating the children.

Over the eighteen years of its existence. ANISA has refined a philosophical statement that is expressed through its theory of development. Since development is the realization of inner potential, ANISA programs, in part, focus on problems of development. It was discovered, for example, that development was brought about through interaction with the environment. Therefore, from the ANISA point of view, teaching means arranging the

environment so as to foster the development of the child's potential. Two factors were revealed to come into play here: biological and psychological.

After examining the matter, ANISA researchers came to the conclusion that the basis of biological development is nutrition. As Jordan put it "A significant percentage of the world's children are mentally deficient — simply because of inadequate diet." ANISA spent $1.5 million in grant funds on this aspect of education alone, field testing the nutrition theory over a five-year period and proving a link between proper diet and the ability to pay attention to what the teacher is saying. "Poor nutrition leads to limited attention and limited learning," Jordan said, adding, "We find a large number of kids with learning deficiencies that are nutritionally related. Under the ANISA system, even teachers have to understand the importance of proper diet for themselves. "Being with kids is stressful, in case you haven' t noticed," Jordan quipped.

Tuning to the psychological aspects of development potential, the ANISA model divides these into five categories: psychomotor, perceptual, cognitive. affective and volition.

PSYCHOMOTOR development was defined as the capacity to differentiate between body muscles and control them. The point here is that gaining psychomotor control of one's body increases one's potential and leads to success in other learning areas. A child who is not confident about using his body will shy away from new learning environments out of fear and will limit his own growth.

PERCEPTION relates to the ability to take in visual information and make sense out of it. This ability varies from child to child and must be developed for the student to gain better advantage of the learning process.

COGNITIVE development has to do with thinking, which everyone agrees is important, but no one can define with precision. ANISA has a cognitive competence curriculum that focuses on teaching a child how to think. Most schools concentrate on teaching children what to think but not necessarily how to think or use critical judgment.

AFFECTIVE deals with learning and organizing emotion, one of the most powerful and least understood influences on human behavior. Jordan noted that people are seldom in charge of their emotions, and it is feeling, more than abstract thinking, that influence human behavior. Under the ANISA model, emotions are placed in two categories: those

which relate to hope and enhance development and those that have their basis in fear and impair development.

VOLITION (Will): relates how to pay attention, a subject that is never taught in schools. Young students are required to hold their minds on a particular subject, but never taught how to do so. Volition training centers on the ability to set goals and create steps to accomplish those goals.

During the question period, Jordan was asked whether ANISA had ever attempted to prove its theories through field experience. He responded that ANISA had been field tested, for five years, but that, there had never been enough money to found an ANISA school to verify the system's fundamental ideas. One overall test was conducted in Springfield Mass. school system where an ANISA program was temporarily installed. Jordan said that data collected found reading scores were significantly higher for the ANISA-trained students than a non-ANISA control group. He also appeared to reject the notion of strict scientific proof, at least in part. The rigid and narrow criteria demanded for accurate field testing have only limited meaning in proving our ANISA, he said, because such variables as personal belief simply defy measurement. Even the ANISA modal rests on the recognition that a child has some control over his own development. There is no way one can predict with 100% accuracy what humans will do; they are just too complex to be measured with reliable accuracy.

Along the way, Dr. Jordan mode one interesting digression in which he touched on the future of Baha' i pioneering. The influence of the Faith is not spreading through its assimilation in the American population. He noted, for example, that the birthrate in the United States is about 10,000 babies born every day "and our enrollment isn't even close to that." But, bypassing American society, the Baha'i Faith could make significant inroads in the world's social agencies, a more important target group. This could come to pass by training Baha'is in any of a variety of occupational skills, such as agronomy, land reclamation, and the like. These are skills essential to developing nations. As the world's political situation hardens, it is less and less likely that Baha'is will gain admission to Third World countries if their approach is purely as religious missionaries. But, if they can offer the technical skills that match their religious dedication, they can have a potent influence on the course of events in such nations.

Dr. Jordan was asked about the likelihood of having the ANISA model adopted by some major school district. He said that he hoped that would happen, but that the ANISA program would not compromise its principles for the sake of being so adopted. He related his presentation of ANISA to the chiefs of the Navaho Reservation. Some of the traditional old men asked if a child, having gone through the ANISA system would still participate in rain dances with his tribe. Jordan replied carefully that the ANISA child might dance for reasons of social solidarity, but would not believe that the dance would bring rain. The chiefs were not happy with his answer.

One class member remarked that if ANISA intends to socialize children into a full, new cosmology, it is unlikely that it will find acceptance by any society, since they will quite naturally want to protect, their own cultural values.

POSTSCRIPT DEPARTMENT…

Betty Conow of Hacienda Heights sent us a letter to clear up some points Which she feels were incorrectly summarized in the previous newsletter and not presented in the way she would have done. Regarding the newsletter report on Wittgenstein's paradox, she wrote that the view presented in the notes was not what she presented in the class: "Your view is from his "Tractatus' a philosophical stand he completely reversed later." {Actually, the newsletter summary of "Wittgenstein's paradox" was culled from notes taken when a college philosophy instructor was contacted for an explanation of the term.} To resume from her letter: "His paradox is quite of a different order. In his first view, he distinguished between mind and matter (objects in the world) and said language merely labels object, etc., in the manner of the logical positivists. This view still admits to the reality of both subjective and objective principles. Later, in "Philosophical Investigations" and his lectures, he essentially denies that mind and matter exist at all, except as words we invent to give order to things. He says that language creates reality God, Mind, etc. are all part of our language games. If enough people agree on what a word means and agree as to how the word should be used, then order is created. That is the Wittgenstein dilemma — all philosophy, religion, mysticism, then are simply games we play within a context we all agree to abide by
the rules. I am not an expert on Wittgenstein; I am only interested in creating a framework of intelligibility that destroys his paradox. His own argument is of course, based upon just another language game itself."

Continuing she wrote, “I’m not say that "God exists within the cosmos as a Creative Force’ to imply that God apportioned a part of Himself as a Force with discernible properties. What I talked about was the important distinction between creation as emanation rather than as manifestation and is the crucial point of argument between Baha’i and those religions which are pantheistic. I remember speaking to that point extensively.

“I never did explain the smaller separate chart that appeared on the handout. It should have been framed or blocked to show that it was not a part of the larger chart. However, it portrays as a symbol what the other chart portrays in words. ‘Reality of realities’ signifies all that is fundamental or all that which underlies all reality. Sometimes Abdu’l-baha uses this phrase to mean this and sometimes He uses it to mean God. There is no cut and dried definition for it — if there were any further meditation upon this idea would effectively be cut off.

“The smaller chart shows Reality as One, portrayed by a Sphere. In the material world of relativities we all look at Reality and see it, not as One but as separate ‘points,’ dissimilar aspects of one thing. The popular Sufi fable of the blind men feeling the elephant, all touching different parts of it, and so all supposing only "his’ sensory experience is correctly describing the elephant, and getting into endless arguments about it. That is what the smaller chart was supposed to convey, although no one even asked me what it meant…

“It is right that I didn’t want to use the intellectual tools that most of us apply to solve all problems. To do so means we have not escaped Wittgenstein’s paradox — that we will only end up talking about definitions of words and not best to use them. It was the very problem I set out to answer a different way, using different tools…”

NEXT CLASS:

The next class will be held on October 29th on a Sunday afternoon at 3:00 P.M. at the home Mehrdad Amanat. His address is [Ed. personal address follows]. At this class Tony Lee will present his resent trip to England where he attended a Seminar on Baha’i Studies held at Cambridge University. He will speak on some of the issues that were raised at that seminar and some of the controversies which were left unresolved. You all be there, y’heah!

[END DOCUMENT]

Related Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Class Newsletter [#32]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

This newsletter is noteworthy not only because it contains a report about a scholarly conference held in England but also because it was later cited as an example of naughty behavior by the NSA of the United States and figured into their decision to ban further publication and dissemination of the LA Class Newsletters.

The class also discusses the crisis brewing in the cradle of the Faith. This discussion was held in October 1978; you may wish to refer to the time line of events leading up to the Iranian revolution for context.

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]

[Ed. personal address]
Hermosa Beach, California
"Impiety is our only Sacred Cow"

November 1978
Volume III. No. 10

Our October study class meeting featured a report by Tony Lee on the two-day Baha'i Studies Seminar at Cambridge University held from September 30 to October 1. It also took up the topic of the current political unrest in Iran and how that affects the Persian Baha'i community.

Tony reported that the Baha'i Studies seminar was called to survey a variety of scholarly topics. Those participating included Peter Smith1 studying sociology at. the University of Loncaster; Moojan Momen, research assistant to Hasan Balyuzi (now assisting the Hand of the Cause with an upcoming book on Baha'u'llah); Denis MacEoin, pursuing a doctorate in Oriental Studies at Cambridge and working on Babi history; Wendy Momen, who holds a doctorate in International Relations; Loni Bramson, studying the history of religions as the Catholic University of Luvain and doing her dissertation on the Faith; Viva Perdu, doing a doctorate in theology at Oxford and writing a dissertation comparing Baha'i and Christian notions of the Kingdom of God. In all, about 35 people attended the conference. Most were spectators. (An official report, of the seminar can be obtained by sending the equivalent of one British pound to Denis MacEoin, Kings College, Cambridge University, England.)

Most of the discussion at the seminar centered on the justification of Baha'i Studies at this point in Baha'i history, the methodology which the Baha'i scholar should use and the role of the Baha'i scholar in the community. Tony summarized some of the highlights of the session which interested him most.

Several of those attending the seminar agreed that, within the last 30 to 40 years, there has been very little Baha'i scholarship. Most of the commentaries on the Faith which we use now in the West were written during the 1920's and 1930's. They focus on the problems of that time: war and peace, international cooperation, race relations, etc. Since that time there have been few new ideas introduced into the Baha'i community.

This is because Shoghi Effendi, beginning in the late 30's turned the attention of the Baha'i Community toward the urgent need for the Baha'i Faith to become a world religion. Scholarship dwindled under the Guardianship. However, in the 1930's most outside observers who noticed the Faith at all came to the conclusion that it was a Persia religious movement which had spread in some circles in the West, but had gone about as far as it would go outside of its native land.

Shoghi Effendi directed a series of global campaigns which were able to spread the Faith all over the planet and forever change the character of the Baha'i community. Nonetheless, the activity of expansion and multiplication occupied the Faith and its followers almost exclusively on through the 1960's and into the 1970's. And it was argued, that emphasis left the Faith largely unprepared to face the social crises which the world must deal with today. While it is true that the Faith has solutions to the world problems today the major

works by the believers which interpret what these solutions might be — such as those of Horace Holley and John Esslemont were written in a different period and in the idiom of a different age. The remedies offered in those books are largely obsolete and irrelevant to current considerations. This leaves the average believer simply unprepared to address contemporary social issues, such as world starvation, population explosion. neo-colonialism, world socialism, ecology arid pollution, women's liberation, economic exploitation, the alienation of industrial society, dwindling fuel resources. etc.

It was argued at the conference that the American Baha'i Community is in a State of stagnation due to a lack of ideas arid a paucity of discussion which fosters change and growth. Therefore, Baha'i scholarship is an essential priority at this time, if the community is to grow arid develop. Often teaching at the local level has become a formula recitation of the "12 Principles" (most of which are already realized or have been supplanted as front-rank social concerns in most parts of the world). While the conferees seed to agree that a steady stream of ideas and proposals is essential to the development of the Faith, they also argued the lack of fresh impulse is one of the reasons that the teaching work is now so difficult and consolidation such a problem in most parts of the world.

Many of those attending the Cambridge seminar were concerned that new ideas should be presented in a gentle and non-threatening manner. Challenging old ways of thinking or overturning popular myths may well shake the faith of some. There is a need for Baha'i scholars to exchange ideas and devise some way to have them filter through to the community at large. As things stand now, the practices and concerns of the scholar are not those of the mass of the faithful. To most Baha'is, tracking down the historical errors in "The Dawn Breakers" is not only a pointless exercise, but possibly heretical as well. How can the scholar communicate what he is trying to do to the body of the believers?

Also discussed was the issue of censorship and review, Although Shoghi Effendi declared that the review of any materials on the Faith written by Baha'is by the administrative institutions which is now required was a temporary measure, it has been in force now for more than 50 years and shows no signs of withering away. How much, if any censorship ought to be permitted in the Baha'i community? If a scholar spends several years researching some topic in the Faith. who is qualified to review his work? Who can challenge the accuracy of his conclusions besides someone who has spent as much time researching the topic as he has. Doesn't this place the scholar in the position of having to

submit his work to a committee which may be wholly ignorant of the topic upon which he has written. And this committee has the absolute right (with the approval of the National Spiritual Assembly involved) to prevent his work from being published.

The topic of Baha'i methodology, especially in the area of history, raised questions of what assumptions the Baha'i scholar ought to make. Is "methodological agnosticism" (where the scholar essentially becomes a non-Baha'i for purposes of research) essential or ever legitimate? If the teachings of Baha'u'llah are for the illumination of the whole world, surely they can illumine scholarship at well. But how? As scholars how are we to regard the Central Figures of the Faith? What about the question of infallibility? Is it absolute or specific? We know that Shoghi Effendi is not to be regarded as infallible in matters of history. Where does this put Cod Passes By When accounts from Baha'i sources and Covenant-breaker sources differ diametrically and there are no third party accounts (there are dozens of historical incidents in which this is the case) should the Baha'i automatically accept the Baha'i version?

If the Cambridge Seminar wondered about these provocative topics, so did our class members as they discussed the same issues. In class, it was argued that we must establish new standards of scientific investigation. Our concepts of empiric investigation were formed during the Renaissance, when the basic criterion required that the scientist look with a neutral, unbiased eye at how natural phenomena performed. The outgrowth of this training is that now we have a scientific method which is devoid of faith. Perhaps a new form of scientific method must be developed, one that acknowledges the appearance of a Messenger of God Who has proclaimed the interdependency of science and religion. Still, an issue that was raise, but not resolved, is what impact this change might have on scientific investigation.

In our rambling discussion, we examined our own role as a class of interested observers (scholarship, in the strict sense of the word cannot be applied to our class), Over the past couple of years, we have examined a variety of topics, raised some provocative questions, but without any real effect on the Baha'i community at large. It was argued that we should intensify our efforts with the aim of making an impact with ideas on the policies and practices of the Baha'i community. The prevailing attitude iii the American community, at least, is that the Prophet comes and delivers a package (an instruction manual, perhaps) to the world. Then it is the simple task of His followers to just apply what has been revealed

(that is, follow instructions). But, this notion leaves no room for thought or creativity on the part of the believers. Their only task is to become good robots. In fact, creativity is to be looked upon with suspicion and innovation avoided as possible heresy. But this view supposes a static society with no social change, and this is just not the history of man. Class members agreed that the Faith works best as an interchange between the individual and the institution. New ideas and new approaches are needed or religious notions become antiquated and a kind of spiritual arteriosclerosis sets in. Very often in the recent history of the Faith policy has come about as a result of just such an interchange. But that spirit seems to have evaporated, and now, more often than not, the body of the believers are expected to only carry out policies, rather than help form them.

Ironically, as the Faith became more institutionalized, the result of Shoghi Effendis work, individual Baha'is became less innovative and more dependent on the administrative institutions to do their thinking for them. This they are incapable of doing of course, because they were never intended to act as a substitute for individual thought.

As a result; in recent years, the Faith has become neglectful of the pressing social issues of our day. What (for example) are our stands on the issue of illegal aliens entering the United States?

What about busing to achieve school integration? What is the Baha'i response to the Marxist view of capitalist exploitation? (See also above.)

Some class members even objected that the same Baha'i principles which may have been clear 50 years ago are so no longer. The principles raise all sorts of questions. What is the equality of men and women? What does that mean for changing sexual roles? How do we apply this principle to real situations? How are men and women equal? it was pointed out that, looking at the Baha'i communities around the world, this principle seems to mean little in practice. The Baha'is have not distinguished themselves as models of sexual equality, but have followed the customs of their respective cultures. If we are supposed to be in the vanguard of social change why have we failed? For lack of fresh and new ideas to spur us on?

In our discussion, it was suggested that a series of weekend seminars on different topics involving Baha'is who are professionals or scholars in various fields ought to be formed to offer advice and suggestions to the National Assembly. But,others contended that it is just

not that simple. One does not sit dawn on a weekend and bash out a raft of bright, new ideas. Such ideas must rise naturally from debate and discussion, within the Baha'i Community as a whole.

For such developments to take place, we must first agree that new ideas are necessary at all and commit ourselves, as a community, to some degree of intellectual life. Right now, the entire National thrust is towards spreading the Faith and multiplying its institution and nevermind new ideas. The achievement of statistical goals has gotten to the point that it is pointless and uninspiring. After a while no one cares if we have 1,400 or 1,800 local Spiritual Assemblies or how many languages Baha'i literature is translated into. The excessive concentrattons on such "shopping list" goals has left the Baha'i community without any sense of culture or unique identification.

And what happens if our zeal for expansion pays off big? Suppose there is a massive influx of new believers'? Is the Baha'i community prepared to handle such an influx. Do we have the flexibility and adaptability to receive large numbers of people into the Faith and socialize them quickly — bringing them into the mainstream of Baha'i life and allowing them to change the course of that mainstream? Experience shows that we do not. Even the recent influx of deepened Persian believers into the United States has caused problems which we are not prepared to handle because we have never thought about them. How does a Baha'i community overcome a language barrier? Some communities in the Los Angeles area have chosen to have translations at the Feasts, while others have steadfastly refused to have them (except, perhaps, for the Treasurer's Report). And what if Armenians and Chinese and Mexicans enter the Faith in large numbers all at once? Do we then translate into four languages? Do we ignore then and go on only in English?

Questions like these came a lot easier than answers. While we could ask how we should socialize ethnic minorities in the Baha'i community, we could not agree on the best methods, or how to safeguard the rights of Baha'i minorities. The unhappy conclusion we arrived at is that the administrative institutions have not identified problem areas. And barring some major re-thinking on the highest levels, we will continue with what one class member termed the "body count' theory of expansion which ignores the question of quality in the quest for quantity.

After a break our discussion shifted to the political situation in Iran, Attending our class session were a number of Iranian Baha'is, including one man who had recently returned

from that crisis-torn country. He reported that the recent wave of anti-government demonstrations, strikes and riots has left Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi in a very bad situation. The Baha'is of Iran have not gone untouched by this widespread social upheaval. There have been hundreds of incidents of beatings, torture and other persecutions outside of Tihran, Our class was told of a Baha'i Center in Gurgun in the province of Mazindaran [Ed. alt spelling: Mazandaran] that was burned to the ground by a mob. Baha'is have been purged from all high government positions. Gen. Khademi, the head of Iran Air and a Baha'i, was fired from his job and them murdered by a group of Muslim youth.

Behind these incidents lies the fact that opposition to the Shah is spearheaded by religiously super-orthodox mullas who have deep antipathy for the Baha'i Faith. Since the pulpits of the mosques have remained for the last many years the only avenues of dissent which have not been crushed by the government of Iran, the frustrated masses of a nation have rallied behind these reactionary leaders. This places the Baha'is is a very dangerous position — especially if the Shah should fall.

Beyond this, there is an even more serious problem. Baha'is in Iran are popularly regarded as firm supporters of the Shah's regime. In the eyes of the leftist revolutionaries, the Baha'i community is committed to the Pahlavi dynasty and, therefore is a common enemy. This is largely due to the fact that some prominent Baha'is have made fortunes by placing themselves in partnership with the royal family and participating in their corrupt dealings) and partially due to a general misunderstanding of the Baha'i Teachings on obedience to government. However, the Baha'i Community has not taken steps to make its neutrality in the current crisis clear.

Beyond this, the Persian Baha'is themselves have cone to confuse loyalty to government with support for the Shah. It was reported, for example, that it is a well-known fact that there are Baha'is who work for SAVAK, the Shah's brutal secret police, notorious for systematic torture, of political prisoners. Rumors are rife in Iran that Amir Abbas Hoveida, the now-jailed ex-prime minister, is a secret Baha'i. (His father was a Covenant-breaker.) For years the Baha'i community did nothing to discourage these rumors. It was evidently felt that such misinformation would provide a measure of protection for the Baha'i community, With the fail of that minister and the wholesale expulsion of Baha'is from government posts, the community is suffering a double blow — partly of its own making.

The bottom line here appears to be that the Baha'i community of Iran is isolated and without allies in Persian society. Even the intellectual classes, who might have opposed the persecution of Baha'is on humanitarian grounds, have written off the Baha'is as servants of the Shah and, therefore, traitors to the nation. As for the Shah himself, his continued reign seems to be the only hope the Baha'is have of avoiding full-scale persecution. But, several class members agreed that the Shah would throw the Iranian Baha'i Community to the mobs without hesitation if he thought that it might shore up his tottering rule.

The Persian Baha'i Community may not be the only one to suffer from having become too identified with a repressive regime. One member of our class had received a letter from some American pioneers in South America. They reported that some native believers in their part of the world had been distressed by a photograph published in a recent issue of Baha'i News (June 1978, p; 13). That picture showed a group of Baha'is (including members of the Continental Board of Counsellors and the Chilean National Spiritual Assembly) posing with Augusto Pinochet Ugarte, the dictator of Chile. Gn. Pinochet, it is widely acknowledged, runs one of the most brutally regimes in Latin America. Further, in the picture in the Baha'i News, television cameras were clearly recording the event for the Chilean masses. By posing for pictures with the General, some class members argued, the Baha'is were allowing themselves to be used as pawns in a political game of power. They were giving a de-facto seal of approval to Pinochet's government – a fact that may be remembered some day, if and when his regime is overthrown. And sometimes military regimes do not last long in South America.

Another class member related a story about the political naivet?[illegible] of the Baha'is. In Belgium at one time the Baha'i community was asked to send some Persian believers to greet the Empress of Iran as she arrived in the airport in Brussels. Every Persian Baha'i in Brussels, save one, turned out to greet the Empress with smiling faces. The news media duly recorded the event. It turns out that no other Persians (non-Baha'is) in Belgium were told that the Empress was to arrive, because the government feared negative demonstrations which would cause some bad publicity, it seems that the Baha'is could he counted on to provide just the political support that the Persian government wanted. And the Baha'is went along, naively thinking that they were being honored by the government and, apparently without the slightest idea that their actions had any political implications.

NEXT CLASS

Actually, the next class has already been held. You will get the notes from that one shortly. But, the class after that will he held on December 17th (a Sunday) at 3:00 P.M. at the home of Anthony A. Lee (also known as Tony) [Ed. personal address and phone number follows] It is not clear just what the topic of the class will, be, bt uTony has been urged to give a lecture on African Traditional Religions and their relationship to the Baha'i Faith. And, if no one comes forward with some other presentation, then that's what it will be. Everyone is requested to bring a needle or two to stick into some object which Tony is preparing. Come prepared!

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Related Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Class Newsletter [#33]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

This newsletter is the two year anniversary of the LA Classes! I just had my third birthday, so this is mighty apropos.

Within this newsletter it is obvious that there was now clear friction between the status quo and new ideas being thrown around. In other notes this was implicit if you read between the lines. But here, it is very evident.

Tony Lee presents an idea that can not be easily shot down: that the process of revelation is a dialogue, rather than a monologue. Although most Baha'is assume that individual believers had no role, except as subservient and passive believers that simply followed the Central Figure of their day, the actual historical evidence is surprising.

And although the writer of this newsletter, as always, pokes fun at the class as being "heretical"… the institutions were by now taking notice of the same thing. But they weren't laughing.

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]

[Ed. personal address]
“Hermosa Bench, love it or leave it.”
Vol. III No. 11

We celebrated the second anniversary of our study class with a verbal dustup over what special role – if any – individual Baha’is have in shaping the Abha Dispensation, Tony Lee got things off and running by re-stating a favorite theory of his. It is his thesis that the Baha’i Faith as we know it is the result of interaction between the Central Authorities of the Faith (be they the Bab, Baha’u’llah, Abdu’l-Baha, Shoghi Effendi or the Universal House of Justice) and individual Baha’is. Most Baha’is, however, behave as if the revelation as a monologue spoken from the prophet to the people. While a central figure provides authority and spiritual impetus for the body of the believers, Lee argued that it is an interaction between charismatic figure and the followers that creates the dynamic of growth and change.

He cited the conference at Badasht in which the Babis – on their own initiative – discarded Islam, deciding that the Babi Faith was a new revelation to which they owed their allegiance and that the laws fo Islam (the sharia) were dead. The Bab, the Author of that revelation, was in prison at the time and had no influence over the conference, although He later ratified its actions. The proclamation of the doctrine of the equality of men and women was launched by Tahirih at that same conference, again, on her own initiative and without the sanction of the Prophet. That stand was later affirmed and is a major Baha’i social tenet. A third and more contemporary example is the establishment of the Baha’i House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois. A group of early American Baha’is learned of the construction of the temple in ‘Ishqabad and asked Abdu’l-Baha’s permission to erect one in the United States. Again, the original idea was that of the believers which the Central Authority later endorsed.

Lee said that he believes that this interchange [sic] is not only misunderstood and unappreciated by the modern Baha'i community, but that it has become significantly weakened over the past 20 or 30 years. The community lost the spark of intellectual foment because of a shift to emphasizing the expansion of the Faith. This policy of worldwide expansion has been successful, but the lack of intellectual activity that has resulted from it is catching up with us. As a result, Lee asserted, we now find ourselves lagging behind current concerns and have dropped from leadership (when in the 1920′s and 30′s our advocacy of interracial fellowship, global peace and world government were little short of revolutionary) down to irrelevance. (that is, now, in the 1970′s, our social positions fail to address the needs and problems of mankind.)

This point of view did not win universal acceptance among the members of the class. For example, Lisa Janti, currently the chairman of the Spiritual Assembly of Los Angeles, countered with a different view. She said that the reason the early Babis and Baha'is played such a fundamental role in shaping the Faith was because they had no access to the Writings of the Central Figures. However, as the Writings became more available, the need to ask questions (and help shape policy) dwindled. The task for believers then became one of digesting and understanding the Teachings. She rejected the notion that Baha'i social principles are passe, saying that they have not been implemented by the Baha'is, but that is another matter.

Mrs. Janti said that other movements tend to emphasize the negative when it comes to social principles She cited the example of the women's movement saying much of its energy is focused on abortion rights, which are a minor issue in the equality of men and women. She also expressed concern about the tone of Lee's position, saying that when the Baha'is would ask a Central Figure questions of interpretation, they did so in the spirit of loving obedience and sincere reverence. Mrs. Janti expressed the fear that class members were copying the jaded cynicism of non-Baha'i movements which preach only the doctrine of attack, and never offer any healing remedy for the problems plaguing mankind.

Dr. Amin Banani, in whose Santa Monica home we were meeting. also voiced concern with Tony's thesis. He said that while everyone agrees that there is a need for new thought in the Faith, it would be a mistake to assign responsibility for developing fresh ideas to some self-styled intellectual elite, among the Baha'is. Baha'i thinkers qualify as no special class among the ranks of the believers and are not the custodians of progress in the Faith.

He pointed out that intellectual haughtiness is a disease of the educated and warned class members against falling into that trap.

Other class members said that those points did not go to the heart of the argument being advanced. Shahin Carrigan of Santa Monica said a kind of Baha'i bureaucracy has grown up and individual Baha'is are relying more and more on their local Assemblies and, in the process abandoning their individual responsibility to think and innovate. It i true, that we have failed to apply the Baha'i principles, but that is because many Baha'is simply do not know how to think. Beyond that, she said, Baha'is are fearful of taking any initiative because they will be shot down by the institutions of the Faith. Mrs. Carrigan said that there is no satisfactory distinction between individual responsibilities and institutional authority.

David Langness of Santa Barbara offered the opinion that the lack of intellectual activity in the Faith is a direct reflection of the fewness of thinkers within its rank. Baha'is in who are intellectually inclined sometimes become inactive simply because there is little value placed on creativity within the Baha'i Community. Those who want to think for themselves find little place in the community and so are forced out.

Shoghi Effendi was an intellectual, in the finest sense of the term, Langness continued, but there are few Baha'is who have followed him. Perhaps the nub of the issue is that intellectual activity centers on debate and the clash of opinions. This is sometimes just the thing that Baha'is want to shy away from, because they regard it as disunity. Langness said it is difficult for intellectuals to enter the Faith and remain within its ranks. He added that more attention ought to be paid to reaching thinkers and those whose ideas have influenced others.

Mehrdad Amanat of Santa Monica pulled the class back to the subject by saying we cannot support the unspoken assumption among Baha'is that our religion became a static, complete package with the death of Shogbi Effendi in 1957. The truth of the matter is that Baba'is lack meaningful answers to the major issues of this decade: human rights, Marxism, economic probems, etc. Criticism of the Baha'i institutions is not treason. Rather, it is the duty of the individual believer to offer his criticism to the institutions. Holding classes in which the role and performance of the institutions is criticized is in order.

But Mrs. Janti expressed discomfort with that view. She responded that the Assemblies are made up of amateurs doing their best. For the administrative institutions to succeed, it is much more important that the body of the believers offer their loving support, rather then their criticisms. And, she wondered aloud about the real motives and intent of the class.

Amin Banani brought things to a head by challenging the entire notion of shared authority in the Faith. He supported the view that the revelation comes from the Prophet and is not expressed in the form, of co-authorship between the religious figure and the body of believers. He asked Mr. Lee to clarify exactly what he intended by his opening statements to the class.

Lee responded that he was not talking about shared authority or issuing any challenge on that score. Authority has only one source in the Baha'i Faith. But, he claimed that a co-authorship of Baha'i history does exist between the Center of the Faith and the believers, The progress of the Faith and the direction in which it has grown are the direct result of the influence of its followers, as well as its Fournders. Even the Baha'i Writings themselves are inconceivable without the participation of the believers themselves.

Beyond that, the Baha'is should not see themselves in a position of waiting for the Universal House of Justice to tell them what to do. Perhaps, they should tell the House of Justice what to do. It is the prerogative of the Supreme Institution to reject their ideas. But, on the other hand, they may accept and a whole new of Baha'i history may be opened because of the initiative of one believer. The point is that a two-way dynamic exists and, for the Faith to progress input from the believers is essential. Religious revelation is not a one-way street and, Lee said, the Faith is not a body of Writings whose contents need only be analyzed for Baha'is to know what their task is.

David Langness supported the activist stance, especially as it applied to interaction between believer end authority figure. He pointed out that had it not been for Laura Dreyfuss Barney "bugging Abdu'l-Baha to death" with her questions at the dinner table we would not now have the book Some Answered Questions which sets out the basics of how the Baha'i Faith views Christianity, among other topics. In view of that interaction which is the common thread of Baha'i history – it is appalling that Baha'is really believe the entire revelation was handed down, holy and pristine, for the believers to merely read and reflect on.

But, David Young disputed this view, arguing that Baha'is asking for guidance in the form of question does not amount to a "co-authorship" of the revelation. Furthermore, he said, it is not true, that the Baha'is lack answers to current social questions such as socialism and human rights. It may be true that Baha'is can be criticized for their failure to take action in these realms where there is material relating to them in the Writings, but such a failure is another matter.

The debate was never resolved. Ron Carrigan said that there are gaps in the revelation where such fundamental issues as economies are not addressed. While the world desperately needs a new theory of economics there is simply no such theory in the Writings of the Central Figures of the Faith. And, the catch phrase "spiritual solution to the economic problem" is so vague that it is both meaningless and useless.

Tony Lee responded that such a lack of economic theory in the Baha'i Writings is undeniably, but that this should not be regarded as a deficiency in the revelation. It simply means that Baha'i thinkers should be challenged to work out such a theory based on the few economic principles recommended in the Writings. The problem is that Baha'is do not see this as their role. Most Baha'is believe that everything of importance has already been covered in the Writings and so there is no need for any further thought. It is common talk at firesides that Baha'ullah brought a new economic system.

One of the ironic highlights of the evening was that the main presentation scheduled for the class, a ten-minute tape-recorded speech which member of the House of Justice Dr. David Rube gave at the University of Illinois in 1966, was not trotted out until late in the evening. In that speech, among other topics, Dr. Rube out lined what he termed "Baha'i higher culture". After first defining "lower culture" as those human concerns with basic survival — food, shelter, sex, material possessions — Dr. Ruhe said that what is needed in every society is a "higher culture" – the arts and humanities. The Baha'i Faith bids to convert the whole of human society and so we must be concerned, not only with the basics of human life, but also with the "higher culture" of man. The future society ,ill be acre complex and lore demanding than anything we have known before. As Baha'is, Dr. Ruhe said, we must begin responding to those demands and assuming a leadership role in shaping our own culture. Including, our own higher culture.

Dr. Ruhe said that that Baha'is ought to learn a lesson from the Jewish Community which honors and credits its scholars, placing them in a special category in the community. He

said that Baha'i artists must also be encouraged and supported financially. These higher activities are a necessary part of Baha'i community life.

RETROSPECTIVE

Now that we are all of two years old (and the betting was 6 to 5 that we would never make it this far), perhaps we aught to take stock. Class members and guests have presented papers on a wide variety of topics – everything from history to Baha'i theology. The class probably offers the only forum of its kind in Southern California, where Baha'is can discuss candidly and in depth – the issues and problems which face the Baha'i community at large. We now have between 70 and 75 people on our mailing list. Most of our subscribers support ($12 a year — that's cheap, gang) comes from American Baha'is living in the United States. About a dozen Canadian Baha'is, for one foolish reason or another also subscribe to our newsletter. Several English Baha'is, in what we assume is a masochistic exercise read it as well. We also have subscribers in such unlikely places as the Central African Empire, Iran, Portugal, Chile, India, and even Zambia. Anytime you are in the area (to visit Disneyland, of course, Why else would anyone come to Southern California?) you are welcome to join in our mildly seditious sessions.

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Related Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Class Newsletter [#34]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

It has been far too long since we heard the whine of the time machine and headed back to the 1970's to join the LA Baha'i studies class.

This latest edition is wholly made up of letters from members and readers around the world. It offers a glimpse into the ideas that other Baha'is (outside of the immediate LA group) had.

The first is a wag of the finger about the relationship what was described in a previous class between the Baha'is of Iran and the then, Shah of Iran. Here is a brief account of the history the monarch's of Iran and their reaction to the Baha'i Faith.

The second is a reaction to the previous discussion on Degrees of Reality. Personally, I found this letter very insightful. It made me think of the Baha'i view of evolution as well as how incomprehensible the next world must be. It also made me think of this segment from a scifi TV show where a human is trying to explain to non-human ("God like") beings what temporal linear existence is like.

The final letter is from Denis MacEoin, a giant of Baha'i theology who after some very nasty run ins with the "appointed arm" decided to become inactive and leave the community. Reading his words, it is hard to believe that what MacEoin wrote is 30 years old! His letter is by far the longest but it is the primary reason why I put this edition together after so much procrastination. A must read.

No wonder that the next class will be a discussion of this very letter. Can't wait for that!

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70's class . . .

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[Ed. personal address removed]

January, 1979
Vol. IV No. 1

Our newsletter this time consists of several stimulating letters which we have received from abroad. We are delighted to see that we have such an active and involved, international readership. Anyone else out there who has something that he wants to get off his chest, just drop us a line.

We hope that our readers will read the essay which we have received from Mr. Denis MacEoin of Cambridge, England, with particular care. He has raised a number of issues central to the crisis which the Baha'i Community is facing today and are in urgent need of discussion. Your comments will be welcomed.

THE NEXT CLASS WILL BE HELD on Sunday, January 28th at 3:00 PM at the unworthy hovel of Anthony Lee [Ed. personal address]. The topic will be a discussion of Mr. MacEoin's essay (The one attached.) and it should be lively. You all come, yaheah?

FROM ENGLAND, ONE READER WRITES:

'I was deeply grieved when I saw the following statement published in your last newsletter: "As for the Shah himself, his continued reign seems to be the only hope the Baha'is have avoiding full scale persecution."

'As you mention a few sentences later, the Shah would not mind sacrificing Baha'is is for his own protection. But, it seems to me that this was a weak voice and was not the opinion of the majority. So after all your experiences and discussions, still the majority believes that the continued reign of the Shah is the only hope for the Baha'is. That is very sad. If the friends, aside from the truth of the matter, were only a little wise they would not publish such eloquent observations which will only cause the Baha'is to suffer the same accusations which yet decry.

'Can you be any more contradictory than to say on page five, while claiming to be intellectual observers, that Baha'is of Iran have confused obedience to government with support for the Shah. (finding them at fault); and then, to say in the next paragraph that the existence of the Shah is better for the Baha'is than any other alternative? Further, in the same paragraph, you express regret for the opposition of the intellectual classes…

'Those who claim to have logical minds, even if they want to speak falsehoods, should speak in such a way that their statements will at least appear acceptable. Perhaps it is better for you to speak only about such things as 'African Traditional Religions' which are of concern to no one, and cease discussing subjects which will only help to worsen the unfortunate situation of those Baha'is in Shiraz who were accused of having participated in pro-Shah demonstrations.

LETTERS WE GET LETTERS :

Mr. Kent Beveridge of Vienna, Austria writes:

“The discussions as contained in the newsletters are something that I have missed since I left the U.S. (a little over seven and one half years ago): a free wheeling discussion about something vital to the lives of all concerned, where no holds are barred (or at least few are barred). I read the four points formulated at the beginning of the class upon which it is based. Such opinions are of basic importance to our Faith, as the beloved Master said “The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions.” I therewith arrive at a different conclusion than that Soheil Samimi of Portugal as expressed in a much finer form in Volume II No. 4. Perhaps she was referring to a newslettar that I don’t have? I haven’t noticed any “scathing remarks!”

"The newsletter summaries have whetted my appetite to take part in your class one day. For a summary — even one as good as these are (my compliments to Bob Ballenger for a difficult jobo well done) — can never be as good as the discussion itself.

“I was especially impressed with the statement that the “Baha’i administration is, in current practice, a dictatorship under which dissent is suppressed and individual Baha’is are cowed into silence.” and the following talk. Such a topic would not be salonf?�hig (an Austro-German term meaning respectable enough to the front parlor) among the study classes in Austria. Not that he subject is taboo. It’s just relegated into the private sphere, where it really does amount to backbiting. This is a topic which is literally crying out to be discussed in an intellectual manner, as we cannot afford to sit back and wait until the answers are brought “down from the mountain” and presented to us. I do feel that one important aspect was missed, however. The institutions are also made up of individuals, and are not internally the same united front which is presented to the outside world. This I know from my experience as a member of the Spiritual Assembly of Vienna, which has a community of 140 Baha’is — not much in your neck of the woods, but one of the largest Baha’i communities in Europe.

“It is difficult to put my feelings into words, but the portrayal of “the Assembly” as a anonymous, brooding, Orwellian body, watching over each and every believer in order to stifle the seeds of dissent even before they start to sprout was a trifle disturbing. However, it gave me a lot of food for thought, and I will meditate on the relationship between the believers and the institutions intensively.”

Mr. Gene Hendershot of Berberati, Central African Empire writes:

"The last newsletter on Degrees of Reality reached me today and Betty Conow touched a field that has always interested me. However, she didn't get involved in my specific area of interest, but instead seemed to he covering several different topics, some of which didn't seem to be directly concerned with the main topic. But, I don't want to get involved in that since I don't have enough information to judge. I can't say that I realty understood it from the little information that was sent out…

"What interests me though is the idea of the Cosmos, the totality of existence. Use whatever word you like, Cosmos seems as good as any. We know that God created a lot of different "worlds" and that our physical, material universe is only one of them. It is the only physical one and the only one with time. Therefore, why can't we simply say that the Cosmos is all of the "worlds of God", plus God Himself….

"As I understand it, in this world all progress is related to time. As time passes, we try to make progress — physical, intellectual and spiritual. Can anyone explain progress to me without relating it to time? I have tried, but I cannot understand progress otherwise. And yet, we know that there is progress in the other worlds, from one state of existence to another and towards God. I would appreciate any comments on this. For me, this is one example of different degrees of reality. Here, the understanding of progress is based on time. However, the Manifestation improves our comprehension of progress by relating it to other worlds, but still our understanding is limited. Obviously, the Manifestation seas the reality of progress differently then we do….

"The use of a circle in describing the Cosmos is the only way we have of showing no beginning and no end, that is, timelessness. But, we know that this is the first world of the individual soul and that before this there was a collective soul. Does this mean that in the world of the collective soul there is also time, since it comes before? Or, is this only a way of expressing it symbolical taking account of Our limited comprehension? Are all of these worlds existing in the same "time" in the eyes of God? In which case, all life is one, has always existed, and the future is already here now. Thus the All-Knowing God has knowledge of past and future, since there is no past and future.

"If all man progress until they attain the presence of God, what does this do with the idea of heaven and hell? If there is no time in the next worlds, then all souls are already in the

presence of God. I guess what I am showing is that, as I said before, I don't understand the concept of timelessness."

KEEP THOSE CARDS AND LETTERS COMING IN, FOLKS !

[Ed. illegible text]
Cambridge
England
7 January 1979

Dear Friends,

I have read your latest (November 1978) Newsletter with more than usual interest and sympathy, and feel that I would like to add a few words in its wake. I shall not try to expand on Tony's account of our seminar here in Cambridge, much as it is tempting to do so — from the report in your Newsletter, he seems to have done a thorough job of leading you through a very complicated set of issues raised there. The full report, as stated, is available, and dwells more thoroughly on the major topics mentioned by Tony.

I was most interested by the discussion reported on pages 3-4 of your summary. As Tony knows, this is a topic about which I personally feel very strongly. In the simplest terms, I fear that the Baha'i faith as it stands today is in very real danger of becoming irrelevant to the problems faced by people in the world outside — if it has not already become so. As the faith has become more and more organized, with, as you so rightly point out, a growing obsession with figures, numbers, and statistics for their own sake, and a tendency to evaluate the significance of the faith as a religion in terms which have no bearing whatever on this (such as how many languages literature has been 'translated' into), we seem to have become more and more introspective and withdrawn, exclusive rather than all-embracing. As a result, most Baha'is appear to be completely ignorant of the issues facing modern man. And, what is worse, they don't care — if you suggest that hey read, say, Marouse [Ed. unclear word], most Baha'is react with a disdainful, slightly superior shrug: 'we have the writings, we don't need to waste our time on the book of false physicians'. As one friend, for some time an NSA secretary (not in the U.K.) put it to me: 'nothing worth reading has ever been written in the twentieth century'. In fact, it is not even a case of whether people are up on Patti Smith or Malcolm Bradbury's latest novel, they have yet to read Marx or early Koestler! Instead, the community is locked into an obsession with issues which were

vital before or just after the first World War and, what is worse, are a lot less forthright now about issues such as war, poverty, race, and so forth that they were then. To speak about race integration in the States in the 20's was genuinely progressive. Last year at a Youth Conference in the U.K. (facing a major race problem and the threat of growing fascism — the country's fascist party is the fourth largest in the country), an NSA member told the youth that we should have nothing to do with the issue of race, since it is political!

In recent years, I feel, the situation has become even more serious (in this country at least). Whereas about ten or more years ago, the Baha'i community tried (in however outdated a fashion) to be involved with society around it, we now seem to think about and talk about and be told about nothing but goals, organization, conferences, and other purely internal matters — very few of them even of a spiritual or genuinely religious nature. Your phrase 'shopping list' goals sums up very well indeed the utterly meaningless hole we seem to have dug ourselves into. The Five Year Plan in this country has been a mindless race after numbers, constant reshuffles, juggling with statistics, bombastic sermons which have passed beyond banality to the depths of uninspiration. Success is judged in teh most material and sterile terms, important long-term tasks of the community have been shelved in order to win insignificant short-term goals, and above all, everybody knows that we will 'win' the Plan, whatever the real result. Beneath the surface, fairly large numbers of people are withdrawing, even larger numbers have become inactive, leaving things in the hands of thick-skinned administrators whom we could as well hire from an employment agency, the teaching work becomes more and more geared to attracting the less spiritual, and the circle becomes a spiral.

Worst of all, I fear, is that the Baha'is are gradually gaining a reputation for hypocrisy and self-interestedness. To give one example, several years ago, when the troubles began in Northern Ireland, a few Baha'is gave help for some time at a refugee centre, along with other groups. Despite the fact that the Quakers, who ran the centre, had asked for no publicity, the Baha'is were the only group to seek and obtain newspaper publicity for their work with refugees. Since then, the Baha'is as a group, in Northern Ireland have done nothing to help anybody, have never even condemned the violence publicly, and have held numerous conferences and teaching activities which even the believers are beginning to avoid. To give just one other example: the Public Relations Officer of the U.K. Baha'i Community recently told a Mayor, in the course of a tree-planting (!) ceremony (which seems to be the most radical activity we engage in) that 'Baha'is the world over were

working hard in thousands of centres to help improve the environment and the quality of life of all the inhabitants of the earth. They were also involved in efforts to resist the spread of deserts which themselves resulted from the wholesale destruction of trees. At world level, through United Nations agencies, the Baha'i International Community was constantly involved in this work of improving the environment'. As any Baha'i should know, this is, quite simply, dishonest and unethical — but this type of exaggeration and distortion, coupled with the fact that we only ever become involved in any activity where there is a chance of publicity for ourselves, will, I feel, soon be regarded as the chief characteristic of the Baha'is, if it is not already in many quarters.

To a large degree, this lack of involvement in live issues is linked to the fact that many contemporary social issues (such as those mentioned in your Newsletter, and others, such as unemployment, prisoners of conscience, the union) have, or appear to have, a high political content. Since Baha'is have failed to define what they mean by politics in the context of 'non-involvement in politics', they are now taking the easiest course, which is to avoid anything which may be remotely political — which means, in effect, just about any relevant social or humanitarian issue today. By dealing with 'safe' issues (such as tree-planting) and 'pie in the sky' policies, we manage to preserve intact our integrity on the principle of non-involvement in politics, even if to do so we have to sacrifice other basic principles regarding war, racialism, sex inequality, tyranny, freedom of conscience, economic adjustment, and so on. The non-involvement tag is our get-out pass from just about everything, and the more we use it the more out of touch and irrelevant we become.

The simple fact is that, in a real sense, the Baha'i faith is one of the most political movements around. After all, principles such as the ending of absolute national sovereignty, world government, universal currency, universal language, sex equality, racial integration, disarmament, world tribunal, anti-communism, retention of constitutional monarchism, the abolition of non-Baha'i religious legal systems (such as the Islamic sharia), the retention of a class system, the abolition of tariffs, international police force, and so on are among the hottest political issues around. Do we just dismember the faith, trimming off any principle or concept that seems likely to offend the political susceptibilities of someone or some government somewhere, or do we accept that we have these principles and that we intend to establish them, destroying, in the process, any other system or ideology which seeks to oppose them? We should also bear in mind that the apparently non-political activity of just teaching the faith is highly political. Quite apart

from problems such as teaching race unity, say, South Africa, it is obvious that they will be able to (in theory, at least) to exert pressure on society as a whole, particularly in a democracy. It is hardly enough to say that we are 'non-political' — after all, we do plan to bring into being a series of Baha'i states and, in the end, a Baha'i world — no less extreme than the aim of every Marxist. And, in the same way that nto everyone jumps with joy at the thought of his country becoming Marxist, so we can hardly expect that there will be universal rejoicing at the news that the Baha'i faith is becoming a threat to the established political system. We may say that the old order is destroying itself and that we intend merely to step in when it collapses, not to actively work for its destruction — but take another look at Marx's theory of the dialectic of history: capitalism destroys itself in order to give way to communism. Instead of engaging in violent revolution to speed up the process, we 'teach the faith'.

Tragically, however, in order to pretend not to be concerned with politics, we have more and more adopted a line of expediency in our relationship with the outside world. This has reached such proportions that Baha'is cannot officially be involved with a totally non-aligned organization such as Amnesty International because it might give rise to a false impression. As a result, we are totally uninvolved with one of the major evils of this century — political and religious oppression coupled with wrongful imprisonment, torture, and execution on the most appalling scale — despite the numerous statements in the writings about opposing injustice and tyranny. Baha'u'llah wrote directly to rulers to reprimand them for their brutality and repression, while we today pose for pictures with Pinochet and Amin (thank God for your reference to the Pinochet photograph – I thought I was the only person who had noticed it). Yet, the moment anyone lifts a finger to harm Baha'is, in however a minor way, there is a universal outcry and we appeal for aid to the UN and suchlike. The Iranian regime has been massacring its people for decades, and thousands are dying in the present troubles, but the only thing to excite protests from the Baha'is has been the threat of violence to themselves. No mention is made of the fact that Jews or Christians have been threatened or attacked. The fact is that we seem to judge the justice of a regime according to how well it treats the Baha'is. An injust regime treating us well is tolerated or even extolled, while a popular regime which deprives us of certain freedoms (perhaps along with other religious groups) is regarded as evil. No one has asked, for example, what the people of Iran, as a whole, want, but what would ensure the safety of the Baha'is there; so if thousands of Shi'i Muslims are killed, who cares? — they deserve it anyway for having persecuted the Baha'is.

As you say in your Newsletter, the Shah's 'continued reign seems to be the only hope the Baha'is have of avoiding full-scale persecution'. There was a time when this need not have been so. The fact is that the Baha'is of Iran have done nothing to help their fellow countryman inside or outside of the country. They have been content to benefit economically and in other ways from the present regime and have gained a real reputation as an inwar-looking community which would sacrifice the country for its own ends. Baha'is actually hate the Muslims and try to have as little as possible to do with them. And they seem unable to understand the impression they create. Many years ago, when some Baha'i villages in Adhirbayjan [Azerbaijan] were suffering from a boycott, a well-known and [illegible].

No one could understand when I pointed out that this would only worsen the situation in the long term. Not only this, but there is a serious level of class distinction between the Baha'is in Ran, a fact which has not escaped the rest of the population, especially the intellectuals. I have lived in a reasonably wealthy Baha'i home in Tihran while, in a room underneath, another Baha'i family with two children lived on bread and yogurt with no furniture – and this is not abnormal. There are many Baha'i meetings in Iran at which a 400 dollar suit would be more of a passport than Baha'i credentials. I don't wish to be mistaken – some of the most wonderful Baha'is in the world (and some of my dearest friends) live in Iran but the community is known for its wealth, inequality, and exclusiveness.

In general, a deradicalization of the Baha'i faith has occurred over recent years. Like many other originally radical religious movements, the faith has moved from a position of active hostility to the existing order (under the Babis) to non-violent condemnation of abuses in politics and religion, to a passive acceptance of the establishment and, of late, a positive attempt to become integrated with the establishment. This latter development is typical of an originally sectarian movement which becomes a denomination, and is generally a consequence (as has taken place in Iran) of second and third generation prosperity, the removal of charisma, and the growth of organizational elements. Baha'is in many places now show considerable eagerness to become respectable. Being a member of a quaint, exotic religious movement is usually acceptable in the first generation, but it can become an embarrassment to later believers who are successful in society and derive benefits from it. We have now reached that stage in several places. To give one example: almost two years ago, the LSA here suggested to the NSA that every LSA in this country should have 5 pounds (about 9 dollars) to the Venezuela earthquake disaster fund; the suggestion was

dismissed on the grounds that we were not concerned with such matters. Not long after, Assemblies and groups throughout the country were asked to give their assistance to government bodies organizing the Queen's Jubilee Fund, collecting money for British youth clubs and organizations. The reason? It was a 'door to proclamation'. A pamphlet was even produced and widely distributed by one Assembly detailing the links of the Baha'i faith with the British monarchy and our support for it. When our Assembly pointed out to the NSA that this kind of activity could be construed in many quarters as political, and that, in areas such as Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales (where there is strong anti-monarchical feeling), the faith would be identified with political views of wide unpopularity, the reply made by the secretary was simply that he could not understand the point we were making. Nor could he understand our making a distinction between loyalty to one's government and active support for the establishment.

It is a tragic situation when, as seems to be happening more and more often, Baha'is show themselves to be proud of the fact that they have gained some form of recognition from the old order. Something subtle is wrong, I think, when, for example, such publicity is given to the fact that Baha'is have been asked to join in an inter-faith service in Westminster Abbey. We now think it a wonderful thing when the very churches which we used to described as defunct and despiritualized patronize us in this way, adn do what we can to ingratiate ourselves with clerics, bishops, and 'respectable' religious organizations. It seems curious too that we appear to be increasingly favourable to establishment, right-wing, and conservative religions and government bodies; we have very little do to with groups which advocate social change, such as Amnesty, race harmony bodies, sex discrimination groups, anti-war movements, and so on, and more and more with bodies advocating stability, order, law, and respectable social behaviour. It is not surprising that Pinochet and others show such favour towards the Baha'is – we are the ideal religious fringe group for repressive regimes: the offer of outward radicalism with absolute acceptance of the status quo in return for toleration. In Marcusan [Ed. unclear word] terms, we are an acceptable alternative to genuine radicalism which may threaten to actually change society. And, as you so well point out in your Newsletter and I have shown above, we are politically naive.

Here again, we are faced with a vicious circle. The faith, as it stands, is predominantly middle-class and conservative (in the West, at least): students, radicals, the …[Ed. segment missing]… as presented and the community as met unattractive and irrelevant to their concerns (to the extent that anybody actually tries to teach such socially unacceptable

people), and so the only converts are won among middle class quasi-liberals — and the circle repeats itself.

The faith seems to be going through a severe crisis — without being aware of it. I have personally little doubt that, if a trenchant radicalization of the community does not take place within the next decade or sooner, it will stagnate and collapse inwards. Exaggerated news items of mass teaching successes and 'unprecedented' campaigns in some areas should not make us lose sight of the fact that, in the longer established communities, there is a growing disillusion, retrogression, routinizatin, and apathy — highlighted by the increasingly frenetic pronouncements that 'things have never been better'. The administration, particularly, the mobile, distant, and woolly appointed side (which is rapidly acquiring many of the characteristics of a clergy), seems to have lost all touch with the mass of believers. At meetings and conferences in this country, it is increasingly rare to find someone not an NSA member, Board Member, Counsellor, or, recently, Assistant, to speak formally — and most of the best-informed and stimulating people belong to none of these bodies. As you write, '…now, more often than not, the body of the believers are expected to only carry out policies, rather than help form them.'

To find a solution to any problems I have outlined above is hardly an easy task. But it is an urgent one — most of all because it is little recognized and even less admitted. Clearly fresh Baha'i scholarship in all fields, with considerably greater freedom of expression than is at present permitted, is a priority, as we discussed at Cambridge. But it is not only scholarship, but any fresh thinking, whether scholarly or not, which is being suppressed by those who are convinced that their version of the Baha'i faith is the one and only true version and anything else is heresy. If greater latitude in such matters is not very soon permitted, I fear that the faith will lose at increasing speed its most intelligent, sensitive, and creative believers — and we will be in the hands of civil servants and clergy. The Baha'is must make the decision … [Ed. illegible] … develop naturally as a universal religion or to prematurely ossify as an establishment 'church'. New ideas are needed — and new actions. It is rubbish to say that, in view of our size and poverty we cannot do anything to help the sufferings of mankind. Single individuals, poor, humble, and dedicated, have, before this, become major forces for good among mankind. The Baha'i community could become a great force for the betterment of the world if, instead of planting trees and talking about the wonderful society of centuries hence, we were to take positive action on the principles for which we claim to stand, if we were to become known

as a people for whom expediency and compromise were anathema, if we were to fight, in however a small and restricted an arena, against injustice, tyranny, oppression, corruption, exploitation, and other social evils — without ever taking sides. Perhaps we would be persecuted in some places, perhaps a few Baha'is would die, perhaps we would be misunderstood by some people — but the faith has always been richer for that. It has been well said that to sit on the fence is to take sides — is it not time to we came off the fence and showed our true commitment to the cause of good and humanity?

With warmest wishes,
[Ed. signature]
Denis MacEoin

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Related Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Class Newsletter [#35]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

This next installment of the LA Class deals with the aftermath of the letter written by Dr. Denis MacEoin regarding the ineffective outreach of the Faith and its flirtation with irrelevancy to an ever advancing world.

There are a wide variety of reactions so I'll let you read them for yourself. But once again, I'm simply floored by how much time has stood still within the Baha'i community. If no one told me, I would never imagine that this discussion had taken place 30 years ago. Enjoy.

If this is your first newsletter, you can read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

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[Ed. personal address removed]

Vol. IV, No. 2
February, 1979

Denis MacEoin's remarkable and outspoken indictment of misplaced emphasis in the Baha'i Community which he characterized as growth fixation, socially irrelevant and politically naive received both grim agreement and some angry opposition during the lengthy January 28, meeting of our class. At this point, we suggest that you re-read the letter which appeared in the last newsletter.

As the discussion began, Tony Lee expressed the view that Baha'i Communities have two responsibilities. The first of these is to insure their own survival by bringing in new members and ordering their own community life. The second of these is to actively work to assist their fellow men. This active concern for society, however, is usually ignored or forgotten as communities concentrate on developing their own internal structure.

It is not enough, Lee argued, to say that Baha'is as individuals are free to engage in activities which are socially oriented. If this were the case, what would distinguish us from say, the Unitarian Church or the Society of Friends (Quakers), both of whose members are more socially active than the Baha'is are. In fact, these two groups have developed a reputation for social concern which is widely respected. While it is true that the Baha'i Faith should lead to a spiritual awareness which other religions do not have access to, this awareness has not automatically produced a heightened social consciousness. In fact, the Baha'i Communities in the United States generally have a lower level of involvement in society than other religious groups do. Lee argued that the essence of MacEoin's argument is that Baha'i Communities must stand firmly and publicly for their own principles, even when (or perhaps, especially when) they are controversial, unpopular or risky. Too often the Baha'i principles are presented in a manner which is deliberately bland and non-threatening. So bland and unthreatening that they become irrelevant.

Greg Wahlstrom agreed, but added that if Baha'is wait for their administrative institutions to take the lead in social activism, they could be waiting a long, long time. Instead, individual Baha'is ought to concentrate on doing things that clearly reflect Baha'i

principles in their daily lives, with the assumption that this will affect others. A bland presentation of the Faith will attract bland people, while a more active posture will bring a more activist element into the Faith.

But, David Young took exception to some of MacEoin's argument. He felt that the English scholar's thesis was the wrong approach to instilling life in the Baha'i Community. Young argued that what is needed is the development of spiritually mature Baha'is and that an emphasis on social action wold lead the community in the wrong direction. Social activism should be the product of social concern and not the other way around.

Amin Banani was also among those who took issue with some points of Denis' letter. He asked that the class consider that the Baha'is represent a tiny portion of mankind, but that we are a group with high ideals and ambitions which take in the re-making of all of human society. As the Faith grows in size and influence, it must pass through various stages. He said that the principles of non-involvement in politics, which MacEoin has cited a cause for Baha'is shying away from current social concerns, should be seen as a tactic which Baha'is must use in this stage of Baha'i history, rather than a permanent policy.

Dr. Banani noted that in the early days of the Faith, the Baha'is were quite political. The fact that, in 1875, Abdu'l-Baha composed the book, The Secret of Divine Civilization, which was a highly political essay giving advice to the Shah, and the fact that in 1890, He composed the work named A Treatise on Politics, are both very significant. But it is also significant that both of these works were composed anonymously. Abdu'l-Baha often encouraged Baha'is in Iran to be politically active, especially in the early days of the Persian constitutional movement (the early 1900′s). All this changed as Abdu'l-Baha saw that the constitutional movement was being co-opted by foreign powers. At that point, He began writing strong letters to the Baha'is of Iran forbidding them to become involved in politics and ordering them to withdraw from the constitutional movement. The Baha'i doctrine of non-involvement in politics was born. Again, Dr. Banani expressed the view that this is a temporary policy which must change as the position of the Baha'i Community changes. How, for example, will we behave when 65% of the population of a country is a Baha'i?

It was also pointed out that the question of non-involvement in politics is a flexible one even now. Obedience to government also has its limits. For instance, at one point the Gestapo in Nazi Germany informed the National Spiritual Assembly there that it would be

permitted to continue its activities and maintain its legal status only if it provided the names of Baha'is of Jewish extraction to the police so that they could be detained. At the instruction of the Guardian, the National Assembly flatly refused. As a result, the institution was dissolved by the government and the Faith and its literature banned. Even so, the Baha'is hid their literature and went underground, again in violation of the law.

Flor Geola of Manhattan Beach suggested that he nub of the problem is the lack of any clear cut definition in the Faith of what is political and what is not. Most Baha'is are not sure and a lot of energy is dissipated on sorting out what constitutes political activity. Most Assemblies are devoting whatever limited resources they have to community problems and can spare no energy for taking on social issues, Dr. Geola said.

Tony Lee pointed out that when Abdu'l-Baha came to this country in 1912, He was not afraid to speak out on controversial political issues. He made radical statements on such topics as women's suffrage, labor-management disputes, the American electoral system, the rights of soldiers, national sovereignty, etc. Now, ironically, American Baha'is would be reluctant to make these same statements for fear of violating their religious principles. This leaves the community with an inward-looking stance, concentrating all of its attention on Feasts and children's classes and ignoring all outside issues. This misses one of the major points of the Faith which is intended to transform all of society, not just be indifferent to it.

Mehrdad Amanat of Santa Monica also spoke for the need for the Baha'i Community to take a more active role in society. He asked, if the Baha'i Community is not actively opposing injustice and oppression around the world, then what are we doing? Has the administrative machinery of the Faith become and end in itself, rather than a means to an end?

Dr. Banani acknowledged that the Baha'i Community has become introspective, but said that the answer to this is not to adopt a trend toward latching on to current social issues. He said the essence of MacEoin's letter is that the Baha'i Community will feel the pressure of events and take stands and feel the pull of conflicting opinions. This is a healthy process, and as the community is drawn into it, as a result of its growing influence in the world, we will see some of the present introspection dissolve.

Mr. Lee suggested that the issue is one of degree rather than of kind. It is clear that the Baha'i Community should not allow itself to be sucked into every controversy which hits

the headlines. But, the community must remain deeply concerned and highly aware of the society around it, and remain sophisticated enough to define major issues for which their should be a clear Baha'i position and speak out on them. He added that the goal of making the Faith a world religion has been largely accomplished. We must now turn to the role of the community in soceity at large. The mindless multiplication of Assemblies and localities is a meaningless goal unless those Assemblies and centers are involved in transforming those societies in which they find themselves.

The discussion continued with the class touching such topics as the price which any believer must pay for espousing views such as those which Mr. MacEoin has bravely put forward. A high price in misunderstanding, suspicions and accusations seem inevitable. On the other hand, some objected,we cannot afford to see ourselves as "beleaguered, victimized martyrs" or we will defeat our own purpose and hamper our effectiveness.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS DEPARTMENT

During the course of our discussion, it was suggested that we mount a Baha'i studies conference or seminar in the Southern California area. Although most of the resulting tak was tentative in nature, it was proposed that Baha'i scholars from overseas be invited to attend, and that the session (perhaps to be held on a weekend) be sponsored by the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, which would be asked to ante up the money to pay for its costs. If successful, the conference could be the launching pad for the formation of an American groups similar to the Canadian Association for Studies on the Baha'i Faith. After chewing over this matter for a while, we decided that Tony Lee would write up a proposal and submit it to the NSA for consideration.

MORE LETTERS!!!!!!!

Mr. Jeol Suffens has kindly shared with us a letter which he wrote to Mr. Denis MacEoin after our last class:

We took up your letter of January 7th in our class of January 28th, which will be reported in our next newsletter. Unfortunately, we did not decide beforehand how to structure the discussion so that, for example, we barely touched on a question of which "non-political" movements, if any (!), we should be associated with. We talked for hours about how Baha'is might take a stand, collectively, on the leading issues of the day, but made little progress on this score since we were unable to resolve the question of even <u>whether</u> we should take stands on such issues at all. The results were disappointing to me and I've

talked with Tony since, and hope that you might perhaps be interested in some of my own thoughts.

As to the question of Baha'is associating with suitable, like-minded non-Baha'i movements, it seems to me that the statements of the Guardian are quite clear. On the institutional level, such association is a positive duty: the National Spiritual Assembly should, where they can and following the example of Abdu'l-Baha, use it as an "indirect" teaching method for the spiritually less receptive, "gradually" inducing in them an awareness of the full "obligations" of the NSAs and of "organized Baha'i communities" to collaborate with such movements in order to "imbue (them) with the spirit of power and strength." Moreover, such an undertaking is not extraneous but "should be regarded as… fulfilling… a vital and necessary function." (Baha'i Administration, pp.124-6) It is a "vital task", too, for Local Spiritual Assemblies to demonstrate "through association with all liberal and humanitarian movements, the universality and comprehensiveness of their Faith." (Principles of Baha'i Administration, p.45)

No doubt, you are aware of other such statements, whether directed at our institutions or individual Baha'is. In connection with the latter, I can't help but mention a tribute paid by the Guardian to Martha Root. Among those of her activities which "constitute a compelling evidence of what the power of Baha'u'llah can achieve," he cites her international travels, her contacts with royalty and so forth, and also "her close affiliation with international organizations, peace societies, humanitarian movements and Esperantists circles." (Baha'i Administration, p.174) Naturally, statements of Baha'i policy in such matters, such as those I've quoted, are almost always found with others warning against associating with organizations which are sectarian, partisan or "political" — and with the proviso that Baha'is not extend assistance to such organizations at the expense of their obligation to support their own institutions. Otherwise, Baha'is are even encouraged to support their own institutions. Otherwise, Baha'is are even encouraged to initiate undertakings "not specifically designated as Baha'i" (Baha'i Administration, p.126)

But what directions do these words suggest for us today? As you point out in a striking example, the peoples of the world are unlikely to rally to our Cause because they have witnessed a tree-planting ceremony; and such self-serving publicity as you've written about is already being detected by then and, quite properly, will be held against us. On the other hand, the ideas behind World Peace Day and World Religion Day, though valid, appear old-

hat to people searching for “relevant” answers to global problems. In fact, so abstract do they seem that even — or, should I say, especially — the Baha’is are frequently unable to see how they tie in with concrete social concerns. Yet, as you point out, we Baha’is cannot afford to be so “out of touch,” for not only does that impede our teaching efforts, but it contributes heavily to apathy within the Baha’i community as well.

So then, where do Baha’is stand with respect to contemporary “hot” issues? During our class discussion it was pointed out that in the US (and, no doubt, the UK), certain very specific, highly controversial issues, such as court-ordered busing of students to achieve racially-integrated schools as required by current interpretations of law (Maybe Britain’s parallel is the immigration issue.), are drawn in such an antagonistic fashion that it would be a mistake for Baha’is publicly to take sides. Yet, at the other extreme, it is simply not sufficient to deal with the race issue only in its most generalized form, piously mouthing slogans like “the oneness of mankind” and “abolition of prejudice.” I tried to suggest a middle course to the class, taking as my example the manner in which Abdu’l-Baha dealt with the question of strikes: He sided with neither labor nor management (managing, in fact, to find fault with both), but instead on dealing with the problem on a more fundamental level — in this case, the level of present laws and economic arrangements. In doing so, He invoked not only generally recognized principles of justice and equity, but also called forth a specifically Baha’i teaching in proposing that “rules and laws should be established to regulate the excessive fortunes of certain masses.” He went on, however, to warn against the consequences of absolute equality, summoning here the principle of moderation. He asserted the right of the courts and the government to intervene in labor disputes, making the point that such difficulties “produce a general detriment” beyond their effects on the parties involved; thus did He carefully distinguish affairs of public concern from entirely private matters, “with which the government should not occupy itself.” Finally, along the way He offered schemes for profit-sharing, pensions and the like. Might not this be our paradigm?

It may be that not every public question requires that we come out with a Baha’i “position paper”; probably some issues are clear-cut enough to call us tinto the streets (or at least into a newspaper’s columns) in protest. But these “fighting issues” have yet to be precisely defined. The situation demands a thorough examination, by means of a wide-ranging airing-out of all pressing social questions from a Baha’i perspective. This won’t happen unless the Baha’is recognize the need for it.

PS Also apropos is the reason given by Shoghi Effendi for writing one of his general letters (for quote, see The Priceless Pearl, pp. 212-213). We do "stand for" something, after all.

AND STILL MORE LETTERS!!!!!!!!

Mr. Robert Parry (Department of Religious Studies, Furness College, Lancaster University, Bailrigg, Lancaster, UK) writes:

I have been receiving the bulletin ever since I picked up a copy at Dinny and Mandy Gronich's place some month's back. It is refreshing to know that somewhere in the Baha'i Community at large there is a printed platform for expressing and discussing views about the Faith, other than the usual safe discussions so common at fire-sides.

The content and level of discussion broached in your paper is, I am sure, seen by many as time-wasting, perhaps heretical and spiritually dangerous. It raises issues deriving from man's arrogant and ungrateful nature — ungrateful for the revelation graciously given by God.

I believe this attitude is, in itself, dangerous and is nowhere endorsed by the Faith, as a whole. Nevertheless, it seems to me to be the ethos of the community at large. Where expansion of numbers is primary, merely believing the revelation is a sufficient condition and clarification of issues becomes a side-issue, perhaps not even that. Thus the ethos of "no questions" arises from internal policy rather than any serious dialogue with the Revelation.

Another point is the notion of believing. In forced expansion and concentration on growth, the emphasis is on acceptance — a whole-hearted, yet restricted "yes" to the Revelation. This restricted "yes" may well constitute the initial step in the act of faith, yet the danger arises when the community demands a constant repetition of this restricted "yes."

I agree with Lee's notion of dialogue, though I prefer to see it in two terms, that is, the believer and history. And on another level as an interaction between questions implicit in the human situation and the answers given in the Revelation. This does not imply that the Writings are some Divine Text-Book, as some of the contributors to your last bulletin feared they were being seen. The work of the Baha'is is, I feel, that of correlation, the correlation between questions and answers. This means we must be familiar with the human situation historically manifested in various systematic disciplines such as history,

philosophy, psychology, sociology, economics, politics, etc., etc., and, of course, familiar with the Revelation. An excessive preoccupation with the Revelation loses touch with the "world" and on the other hand, an excessive preoccupation with the "world" loses touch with what may be decisive for the interpretation of our life.

I suppose that the question that has to be asked is about the weight attributed to each of the terms of the correlative relationship. Is it sufficient to have a theoretical grasp of the human situation in its manifestations alongside the required existential involvement with the revelation? I don't think we could accept the opposite, that is, an existential involvement with the human situation along side a theoretical grasp of the Faith.

Anyway, I think your bulletin goes a long way in attempting to answer the former qustion, and in attempting to answer a further question, namely the status and extent of the human situation, with its questions. You enter the time-honored Revelation/Reason, Faith/ Knowledge, Grace/Nature controversy. I hope that the bulletin has many birthdays.

THE NEXT CLASS…

The next deepening class will be held on Sunday, February 18th at 2:30 PM at the luxurious apartment of Ms. Sherna Hough and Ms. Lisa Janti, [*Ed. private address*]. The class will be in two sections: First, Mr. Richard Kownacki will present a paper on "The Political Dimensions of the Babi Movement", and this will be followed by another discussion of Denis MacEoin's now famous letter of January 7, 1979. Dr. David Young will lead the latter discussion.

[END DOCUMENT]

Related Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#1]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

I am amazed at the simplicity and elegance of the four ‘guidelines’ that the class adopts. At once they set the foundation for a fruitful and positive gathering of Baha’is. I will insist that if you wish to create a similar class for your own community, you do not try without them.

Right at the onset, the class opens up a can of worms. It has been a common complaint of Baha’i historians and scholars that Baha’i history has stopped in its tracks because of the ‘historical’ works of the Central Figures of the Faith (or their approval of similar works by others such as Nabil). Since these works did not follow prescribed and currently accepted methods of historiography, they are sometimes at odds with events and facts which have been later unearthed. However, the devotion and esteem that Baha’is hold towards the authors is such that to suggest that they could be wrong is simply taboo. The heavy burden of “setting the record straight”, while not getting lynched in the process, rests on the shoulders of modern Baha’i and Babi scholars. Unfortunately, some have not gotten away with their hides intact.

Also of interest is the name Vahid Rafati, listed as one of the Baha’is who, while not attending the classes, are interested to receive the newsletter. Dr. Rafati (Ph.D. from UCLA) would later become the director of the Research Department at the Baha’i World Centre, in Haifa, Israel.

Before proceeding you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]
[Ed. private home address]
November 9, 1976
Dear Baha’i Friends:

Several Baha’is got together on October 30th to begin a new study class on the Baha’i Faith. It occurred to me that it might be useful to write up a short summary of what took place at the meeting for the information of those who did not attend and for review by those who did. The following should be regarded as a very much an informal report, however.

Thirteen Baha’is were present at the first seminar. They were:

Sidney and Karen Morrison [Ed. private home address and phone number follows for each]
Richard Grieser and John Yazdi
Soheil Sohrab, Behnaz Sohrab and Lili Sohrab
Ron and Shahin Carrington
John Zehral
Kami Namdar
Mehrdad Amanat
Anthony Lee

This letter is also being sent to the following Baha'is who have expressed an interest in the effort:

Amin Banani
Robert Ballanger
Oscar DeGruy
John and Chris Hendershot
John and Homa Snibbe
Vahid Rafati
Joel Suffens

The seminar began with a short presentation which outlined some of the purposes of the gathering and proposed certain guidelines which were to be observed by the participants. First, it was noted that under most circumstances (such as at ordinary fire sides and deepening classes) Baha'is are forced to edit their comments and avoid discussion of certain topics for fear for giving non-Baha'is and unbalanced or unfavorable impression of the Faith or to avoid confusing new believers who may not be well grounded in the teachings. This is as it should be. However, it was proposed that there should also be some place where knowledgeable Baha'is can gather to speak freely, exchange ideas and discuss difficult questions without concern for such matters. It is hoped that this new class will provide such a forum.

Four sets of guidelines were proposed as ground rules for the seminar and these seem to have been accepted by the group. They were:

1) There should be no topics which are barred from discussion, no questions which can not be asked, and no opinions which can not be put forth openly. No subject will be regarded as taboo. Rather the floor will be open to all themes.

2) During the course of the discussion it will be regarded as improper for anyone to question another speaker's faith in Baha'ullah, his commitment to the Covenant, or his devotion to the Faith or its Central Figures. We all enter the discussion as Baha'is with a common commitment to beliefs which is beyond challenge or suspicion.

3) Ideas and points of view will inevitably differ. Everyone who speaks should expect that his ideas will be challenged and be prepared to support them with evidence which will be acceptable to others.

4) The discussion will be intellectual (in the best sense of the word). This is not to say that we will not discuss feelings or that the discussion will be pedantic or obscure. Rather is meant that we are interacting with each other on a level of ideas (not personality or emotion) and that the goal of the discussion will be an exchange of ideas, not emotions (though such an exchange will hopefully prove to be meaningful and emotionally satisfying.) There was a good deal of discussion on this point and it perhaps was not accepted as fully as the others by the group as a whole.

After this presentation, there was an extended discussion of the goals, purposes, format and subject matter of the class. A division seemed to develop between those who were primarily interested in an academic and detailed study of Baha'i history and teachings and those who expressed the need for a place to discuss personal questions and problems with the Faith as it relates to daily life.

As a compromise, the group agreed to divide each meeting into two parts for the time being. The first part will consist of a presentation by one member of the class of his research on some subject of the Faith which is of some special interest to him. This will be followed by discussion on that subject. The second part will be a more informal discussion without an established topic during which questions and problems may be raised by anyone present. It was agreed that the class should meet once every two weeks on Saturday at 3 pm. The place will rotate from home to home and will be decided at the end of each meeting.

The next seminar will be held on Saturday, November 13th at 3:00pm at the Sohrab's home [Ed. home address and directions follows].

The discussion of goals and format was followed by a short presentation based on the letter of the Universal House of Justice, which was sent to Mr. Richard Greiser dated July 25th 1974. (A copy of this letter is enclosed for those who were not present.) The letter was read in full. The gist of the presentation was that the letter seems to indicate that neither Abdu'l-Baha, nor Shoghi Effendi need to be regarded as infallible in matters of historical accuracy. This is significant since both of these men have written histories of the Faith. (*A Traveller's Narrative* and *God Passes By*, respectively). It was maintained that neither of these works needs be regarded as authoritative in matters of historical fact and certainly should not be regarded as "infallible history". In fact the speaker went on to claim that since they do not conform to the accepted standards of historiography, they should not be regarded as histories at all (in the regular sense), but more as commentaries on Baha'i history. Much lively discussion followed.

The topic of discussion for the next session had to be decided with some haste. Shahin Carrigan generously offered to give a presentation next time on the problems raised by the need for "value-free science" and the commitment of a Baha'i scientist (or scholar) to his Faith. Objection was immediately raised that there is no such thing as "value-free" science or "value-free" scholarship of any kind, but the discussion was postponed for next time. Everyone was asked to do some private research on the question of values and objectivity in science and social science.

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Adding a personal note, it appears to me that the seminar has not yet found its direction or really taken shape. There is a real need for a clearer focus. Next week's topic may be a bit more diffuse than it should be. However, a clearer focus can only emerge from further discussion and practice. Anyone who expects a fully developed class of this kind to drop from the sky is going to be dissapointed.

Let me propose some topics for future study which we can discuss next time. We might concentrate on episodes and careers of Babi history for instance (the conference of Badasht, the life of Quddus or Tahirih, or of Mirza Yahya for that matter). We could look at some recent attacks on the Baha'i Faith such as William Miller's book, and investigate the

arguments and responses. The whole question of Baha'i historiography is fascinating and Balyuzi's book, E.G. Browne and the Baha'i Faith might be a good place to start. There are also some doctoral dissertations on the Faith which might merit some study. And so on.

Let's talk about it carefully this time when we choose the next topic of study!

Baha'i love,
[signed: Tony]

[Ed. the following is the letter from the House of Justice, referred to above.]

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
Baha'i World Centre
Haifa, Israel
Cable Address
BAHAIFAITH, Haifa

July 25, 1974

Mr. Richard Greiser
[Ed. personal address]

Dear Baha'i Friend,

We have received your letter stating you were disturbed by statements made in your deepening class regarding the infallibility of the beloved Guardian and we appreciate your concern.

According to your letter, this question arose in connection with Shoghi Effendi's references in God Passes By to historical events, and in his description of the characters of opponents of the Faith, particularly that of Haji Mirza Aqasi. Letters written on behalf of the Guardian by his secretary to individuals who asked similar questions clearly define the sphere of the Guardian's in fallibility. We quote from two of these, one written in 1944, the second in 1956.

"The infallibility of the Guardian is confined to matters which are related strictly to the Cause and interpretations of the Teachings.; he is not an infallible authority on other subjects, such as economics, science, etc."

“The Guardian’s infallibility covers interpretation of the revealed word and its application. Likewise any instructions he may issue having to do with the protection of the Faith, or its well-being must be closely obeyed, as he is infallible in the protection of the Faith. He is assured the guidance of both Baha’u’llah and the Bab, as the Will and Testament of Abdu’l-Baha clearly reveals.”

Now in the matter of accuracy of historical fact, Shoghi Effendi had to rely on available information. For example, on page 5 of God Passes By, he refers to Haji Mirza Aqasi as “…the idolized tutor of Muhammad Shah, a vulgar, false-hearted, and fickle-minded schemer…” An appropriate and pertinent quotation supporting that characterization can be found in P.M. Sykes’s A History of Persia, Volume 2, pages 439-440, which appears as a footnote on page 235 of Nabil’s Narrative:

“The state of Persian was not satisfactory; for Haji Mirza Aqasi, who had been its virtual ruler for thirteen years, ‘was utterly ignorant of statesmanship or of military science, yet too vain to receive instruction and too jealous to admit admit of a coadjutor; brutal in his language; insolent in his demeanor; indolent in his habits; he brought the exchequer to the verge of bankruptcy and the country to the brink of revolution…’ Such – to adopt the weighty words of Rawlinson – was the condition of Persia in the middle of the nineteenth century.”

The Guardian was meticulous about the authenticity of historical fact. One of the friends in Yazd wrote to him stating that the account given by Abdu’l-Baha in one of His Tablets about events related to the martyrdom of some of the believers in that place was in conflict with known facts about these events. Shoghi Effendi replies saying that the friends should investigate the facts carefully and unhesitatingly register them in their historical records, since Abdu’l-Baha himself had prefaced His recording of the events in His Tablet with a statement that it was based on news received from Yazd.

It is a great pity if some of the friends fail to recognize the matchless prose to be found in the Guardian’s writings. Shoghi Effendi’s masterly use of the English language makes the meaning abundantly clear, and that is an essential quality of great works.

We are delighted that you and your dear wife are conducting classes for the benefit of the friends, and we will remember you both in our prayers at the Holy Threshold.

With warmest Baha’i greetings,

[Signed: The Universal House of Justice]

cc: National Spiritual Assembly of the United States

[END DOCUMENT]

Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.
Go to the next LA Class Newsletter #2

LA Study Class Newsletter [#10]

My Notes:This edition of the study class is about what might be called “women´s issues”; contraception, abortion, etc. All very controversial topics under any circumstances but even more charged in a religious context where there is really no explicit treatment of these issues.

It also touches on a topic of some concern for many Baha’is: internal and unnecessary bureaucracy. The example mentioned below is about the strange mechanistic notion adopted by the Guardian that Baha’i communities should be organized according the legal limits of counties, municipalities and cities. Most of the time this serves the community well, but as the example below shows, there are some times which is appears to be simply idiotic. Of course, there is no reason why a more flexible approach can not be adopted where it is applied in larger communities and then done away with in small communities to adapt to their reality. Unfortunately, this sort of flexibility is lost because the guidelines of the Guardian are upheld rigidly 50 years after his passing in a mistaken belief that this is piety or “strength in the Covenant”.

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]
[Ed. personal address]

February 28, 1977
Dear Baha'i Friends:

Here are the latest additions and corrections to our mailing list:

Dennis Best [Ed. personal mailing address follows for each]
Susan Engwall
Carole Anston
Bobbie Inahara [Ed. location: Switzerland!]
Margaret Fife
Richard Bruce
Brian Abrom
Ron Thomson
Daniel Agyemang

Please remember that this newsletter is no longer free. A subscription costs one dollar per month. If you have not yet paid your share please do so before your name is dropped from out mailing list.

The class met last on February 19th. Unfortunately, there was a last minute change in schedule which caused Greg Wahlstrom's presentation on the Calamity to be postponed yet another time. Since our next class or maybe two (maybe three) will be devoted to Mr. Kazemzadeh and the history of the Baha'i community Ishqabad, the calamity has been pushed back to some future date.

The last class had no formal presentation last time. We had a visitor from Wyoming, Larry Lipshin. He started things off by giving us a short report on the state of the Baha'i community of Wyoming. The state has a population of 300,000; 65,000 of whom live in the capital of Cheyenne. There are only 122 Baha'is in the state however, and 55 of them are isolated believers. The largest Baha'i community in the state, Cheyenne has a grand total of 14 Baha'is. It seems that teaching in the state is slow. Even in the best of times the success rate in teaching is frustratingly low. People do become Baha'is in Wyoming, but not very many and not very often. It is easy for the Baha'i community to experience long lapses in activities, too. Baha'i administrative red tape is also a hindrance. Although Ft. Collins, Colorado is only 50 miles south of Cheyenne, getting a speaker to come in from there

involves going through two local assemblies and two district teaching committees. Larry explained that state boundaries present quite a mental barrier to Baha'is.

Next the class took up the subject of birth control and other related topics. It seems that it has become common recently to hear Baha'is at firesides presenting "the Baha'i view" of birth control or abortion or contraception. These statements are usually dogmatic and inflexible. . . and usually wrong. The class read quotations from a compilation on Birth Control put out by the National Spiritual Assembly [of the Baha'is of the United States] which is available upon request (write to: 112 Linden Avenue, Wilmette, Illinois 60091).

There were three quotations on the subject of contraception. The first was a letter from Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer written through his secretary [on] October 14, 1935. In it Shoghi Effendi states that neither Baha'u'llah or Abdu'l-Baha ever revealed anything about birth control. (So much for the idea that the Writings contain answer to every possible question.) This is an important statement because it means that Baha'is may be guided by their own consciences in this matter. However, the Guardian warns that the idea of birth control has certain dangers to the foundation of social life, namely, marriage. For the Writings clearly teach that procreation of children and their education in the teachings of God is the primary purpose of marriage. So, the Guardian went on to say, "Birth Control,except in exceptional cases, is therefore not permissible."

The next quotation was also from the Guardian through his secretary to an individual believer (the same one?) dated February 4, 1947. In it Shoghi Effendi again states that there is no reference whatsoever in the Writings on this subject (which, of course, makes it impossible for him to give any interpretation on this subject). "We, as Baha'is, are not therefore in a position either to condemn the practice of birth control or to confirm it." However, there are teachings on the subject of marriage which the Guardian interpreted to mean that the use of contraceptives to prevent having any children at all within a marriage is contrary to the spirit of the Faith, and therefore, forbidden to the believers. But, he added that the House of Justice would have to legislate on this issue in the future.

The final quotation was from the Universal House of Justice (July 13, 1967) saying simply that the time was not right for it to make any decision on this matter, and that, in the meantime, the Baha'is could be guided by the above quotations.

The quotations taken together (and any one of them would be difficult to understand in isolation) seemed to set a moderate course, which balances two principles against one another. The first, that there are no Baha'i teachings on this subject and therefore the Baha'is may do as they please. The second, that the primary purpose of marriage is to raise up children to worship God. (We noted that this is not the only purpose of marriage, as the Writings clearly state.)

Next, abortion. From a letter dated August 25, 1939 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer we read simply that "abortion is forbidden in the Cause". However, the Universal House of Justice wrote to a National Spiritual Assembly on May 5, 1971 [explaining] that while abortion merely for the purpose of getting rid of an unwanted child is absolutely forbidden, there are some circumstances in which an abortion could be justified. Again, we have an issue which is not dealt with in the Sacred Text and upon which the House of Justice does not wish to legislate at this time. So, the believers, it is stated must be guided by the above principle, the best professional advice they can get (medical, psychological, possibly legal?) and their own consciences.

The class noted that the House of Justice does not mention the Institutions of the Faith as a source of guidance here. Presumably, a woman considering an abortion could seek advice from a local Assembly, let's say. But, the Assembly would clearly have no binding authority in the matter. They could not forbid her to have an abortion or direct her to do so. Ultimately, it is her decision and hers alone. . . at least at this point in Baha'i history.

Again contradictory principles find an uneasy reconciliation. And, again the quotations would be very difficult to interpret alone.

And sterilization. A letter from the House of Justice dated August 14, 1967 states that Shoghi Effendi stated that sterilization is not permissible and that one who commits it is responsible before God, the sterilizer or the sterilizee. Presumably both. But, there is only one quotation in the National Assembly's compilation in this subject and it is next to impossible to understand alone. The class decided that we could draw no conclusions without other quotations or references.

The class continued a free discussion through the afternoon and kicked around such topics as chastity and sex, dating behavior among Baha'is, the Merida Conference, etc. We got into one real donnybrook about whether or not Baha'is should maintain their ethnic

identities within the Baha'i community or shed it as a vestige of the old world order. Specifically, the problem is Jews who become Baha'is. At least in this area, they tend to shed as much of their Jewish identity as possibly as soon as they sign their declaration cards. Some objected that this was a gross misunderstanding of the Faith, while others argued that it was the proper thing to do. We were 180 degrees apart on this one. The subject will, no doubt, come up again.

THE NEXT CLASS will be held on Sunday, March 6 at 3 pm. It is during the Fast, so eat a big breakfast. We will have a kind of living history lesson since the class will be given over to Mr. Kazem Kazemzadeh , a Persian Baha'i who was born in Ishqabad, Russia under the Czarist regime. He will talk to us about his recollections of the early Baha'i communities in Russia. (We understand that he served on the local spiritual assembly of Moscow for a time.) The class will be held at the home of Anthony Lee [Ed. home address and directions follow]. Dinner will be served when the sun goes down and we will socialize and talk into the night.

THOSE WHO ATTEND THIS CLASS are asked to prepare for it by reading up on the Baha'i community of Ishqabad in God Passes By and in the Baha'i World Volumes IV, VIII and XIX. Please come prepared to ask intelligent questions.

[END DOCUMENT]

Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#11]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

In this newsletter we see that after the interaction with Dr. MacEoin, the classes (and the resulting newsletter) are gaining further scholarly attention. Three more Baha'i scholars in England join the mailing list in this edition.

They are: Peter Smith, Abbas Amanat and Moojan Momen. All three are well regarded Baha'i scholars today and all resided then in England. Of the three Moojan Momen is probably the most well known in today's Baha'i circles and is also the person currently in charge of the Afnan Library. Abbas Amanat is now rumoured to be estranged from the Baha'i community (I assume that he is still a Baha'i) but is nevertheless an erudite scholar and a significant contributor to Baha'i and Babi sholarship.

There has developed, over time, a division in the ranks of Baha'i scholars between those who follow the scientific inquiry of scholarship wherever it may lead and those who are ever mindful of the widely accepted norms of their time and attempt to wrestle their research into the confines of these accepted boundaries. Those who grududgingly (or even contentedly) submit themselves to pre-publication review and those who see it as an anachronism and nothing more than a thinly veiled process of censorship by individuals who are do not even have the academic qualifications to pronounce judgement on such works.

Abbas Amanat, Juan Cole, and MacEoin (among others) were ones who could not stand the status quo and in different ways paid the price. Amanat, who is a devout and loyal lover of the Persons of the Bab and Baha'u'llah has apparenlty chosen to withdraw. MacEoin, tragically is no longer a Baha'i having been 'forced out' for his views. Juan Cole admits that he lost his Faith for a while but has since reaffirmed it and continues to be a Baha'i as well as an active scholar. Each of these personal histories is available on the internet, with varying degrees of detail, if you wish to know more.

Unfortunately, many of the Baha'i 'scholarly' works today simply don't measure up to widely accepted standards and would not be accepted by scholars in their respective fields. In fact, Baha´i authors are normaly only considered 'scholars' within the Baha'i community, where they enjoy a popular following; travelling to different communities and conferences to give talks and lectures. I feel that the only way that scholarship can expand the boundaries of knowledge is to be on the edge of what is accepted and what is not and then to break through these limitating demarcation lines. Scholarship has to be unbiased, scientific and yes, creative. Unfortunately, the only sanctioned type of Baha´i scholarship nowadays is that which limits itself to simply reaffirming what is already known. For an example of scholarship that does measure up to widely accepted standards and is accepted

by the peers of the author, check this book out. Or you may wish to join Talisman where other scholars post their on going works in progress.

This newsletter contains a fascinating, first person anecdotal description of the Ishqabad Baha'i community by Mr. Kazemzadeh. Another prominent member of the Baha'i Faith who was also there along with him was the Hand of the Cause of God, Dr. Ali Akbar Furutan. He was well known in the Baha'i community not only as a member of that chosen elite corps, but also as a great educator. His books on child rearing and education are still a mainstay in Baha'i families.

In memory of the late Dr. Furutan, I'll share with you a small anecdote. The Guardian held Dr. Furutan in such high regard that once when he was not elected to the LSA of Ishqabad, Shoghi Effendi cabled the Baha'is there and instructed them to hold another election. Although he did not explicitely say it, he wanted Dr. Furutan on that LSA! And when Furutan was elected (again) to serve in that capacity, the Guardian cabled back with a congradulatory message.

This slice of history interesting to me because it makes me think: had we a Guardian, would he seek such influence in the elected institutions? would that influence, lacking today, have changed the LSAs and NSAs around the world to be much different than they are now? and would such an influence have been frowned upon or would it have been accepted by the Baha'is?

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]
[Ed. personal address]
March 6, 1977
Dear Baha'i Friends:

These are the latest additions to our mailing list:

Peter Smith [Ed. personal mailing address follows for each]
Dr. Moojan Momen

Abbas Amanat
Irene Trulear
Robin Riles
Allen and Teresa Tarson
Shidan and Suzanne Taslimi
Richard and Bambi Betts
Richard Powerll

For those living outside of the United States, this newsletter is free. However, for everyone else a subscription costs one dollar a month. There are several who have not yet paid their share. We hope that they will do so soon in order to avoid being dropped form the mailing list. Money should be sent to Anthony Lee [Ed. mailing address follows].

At the last class we had the pleasure of hearing Mr. Kazem Kazemzadeh discuss his personal reminscences of the Baha'i community of Ishqabad. The session was fascinating and the class decided to invite Mr. Kazemzadeh back on April 3rd. Watch for further details.

Enclosed is a narrative summary of information which we obtained from Mr. Kazemzadeh on Ishqabad which Robert Ballenger has kindly prepared from his notes. Stenographic notes of the talk were also taken and will eventually be deposited in the archives of the Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Los Angeles for the benefit of future historians.

Also enclosed is another contribution from Dr. Denis MacEoin. He has kindly offered to share with us his own analysis of the sources for the words of the Central Figures of the Faith. He cautions us, however, that this analysis is only a preliminary attempt which was prepared about seven years ago. Mr. MacEoin states that there are important changes that he would make today, if he were to revise the outline, especially with respect to the question of authenticity. He is now inclined more towards the use of more scientific data to determine this question.

The reader will recall that in the newsletter of December 21, 1976, Anthony Lee offered a tentative categorization of the Baha'i Sacred Writings. It is interesting and useful to contrast the two analyses. We must again offer our sincere thanks to Mr. MacEoin for his general contribution to our class.

THE NEXT CLASS will be held at 3 pm at the house of Anthony Lee [Ed. home address and phone number follows]. Greg Wahlstrom will be making his log awaited presentation on the Calamity.A pot-luck dinner will follow, and since we will be fasting, everyone should bring a substantial amount of food.

[Ed. the following is the summary of the talk by Mr. Kazemzadeh, prepared by Robert Ballenger]
[Ed. personal address]
March 6, 1977
Dear Baha'i Friends,

In the early 1900′s, at the height of its power and influence, Ishqabad was the most complete Baha'i community in the world. Within a few years, its influence was shattered, its institutions dissolved, its believers imprisoned and, in some cases, executed and its existence all but snuffed out. The Baha'i Study Class of Los Angeles heard the details of this transformation from a man who saw much of it happen, Mr. Kazem Kazemzadeh, now living in Santa Monica, California. Here is what he told us at our class of March 6.

The area of Ishqabad was seized from Persia by Russia in 1881. Before the Russian conquest, Ishqabad was little more than a tent city of some 500 dwellers on a windy plain. Czarist authorities decided to make it the administrative center of Turkistan (now known as the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic). They pushed through a railroad and Ishqabad became an important administrative center in Southern Russia. Almost overnight, Ishqabad, a dusty, sleepy backwater, was transformed into a boom town. Around 1884, a relative of the Bab named Muhammad Riza [Ed. alternative spelling: Ridha] visited Ishqabad and recognized its potential. Not far from Iran's northern frontier, it seemed an ideal place for a Baha'i community. Muhammad Riza travelled to Akka and conferred with Baha'u'llah about the possibility of sending Baha'i pioneers to Ishqabad. Baha'u'llah agreed and wrote a Tablet to Persia, urging Baha'is to emigrate to Ishqabad. About 200-300 believers , from all parts of Persia, did so. It was not hard to recruit volunteers. Iran was in the throes of one of its periodic persecutions of Baha'is. Baha'is began moving to Ishqabad, buying land, and beginning new lives as merchants and tradesmen. As Mr. Kazemzadeh, who was born in Ishqabad, put it "in comparison to Persia, it was paradise." By 1890, there were about 1000 Baha'is living in the Ishqabad area.

They were not the only emigrants to this new land. Other Persians, Muslims, also moved into Ishqabad, often bringing their fanatical hatred of the Baha'is along with their baggage. In September, 1889, Muhammad Riza was murdered in the town's bazaar in broad daylight by two hired assassins. The czarist government moved quickly. About a dozen Muslims were arrested as participants or accomplices to the crime. Czar Alexander III sent in a military commission from St. Pertersburg (now Leningrad) to conduct the trial. The trial itself had some curious aspects. The Muslims arrested readily admitted having killed Muhammad Riza. They claimed he had insulted the Imams, which provoked the wrath of the deeply religious Islamic community. But underlying their statements was a confidence borne of experience. In Persia, one could kill Baha'is with virtual impunity and not fear punishment. Indeed, the Muslims were so certain of acquittal that they began laying plans for a general massacre of the Baha'is once the legal formalities were over. Meanwhile, the Baha'is feared that, once again, they would be the victims of a religious pogram.

This time would be different. The judge in the trial ordered his courtroom segregated to separate the Baha'is from the Muslims. That constituted the first official recognition that the Baha'i Faith was not an Islamic sect. As the prosecutor presented his case, he asked each of the defendants if they had murdered or conspired to kill Muhammad Riza. They all testified openly that they did. Summarizing his case to the court, the prosecutor urged that the two assassins be hanged and the others involved banished to Siberia for various prison terms. The Muslims were stunned. The judge agreed to that sentence and ordered it carried out. Upon learning of the verdict and sentence, the Persian and Turkish governments attempted to intervene on behalf of the Muslim defendants, but the czarist government rejected their pleas. Swallowing their pride, leaders of the Muslim community approached the Baha'is and asked them to intercede and seek lesser sentences. The Baha'is agreed and asked the Russian governor of Ishqabad to reduce the punishment. The governor passed the request along to his superiors in Tashkent. On the day the two assassins were to die on the gallows erected in front of the local high school, government authorities announced that, because of the intercession of the Baha'is, the two murderers would not be hung. Instead they, along with the other Muslims involved in Muhammad Riza's slaying were banished to Siberia.

The trial and its result established for the first time ever that the Baha'is had a right to exist free from persecution of the Muslims. By successfully persuading the authorities to reduce the punishments for the Muslims, the Baha'i community gained an enormous amount of

prestige. The end of the trial signaled the beginning of the flowering of the Baha'i community in Ishqabad. Developing land they had purchased earlier, the Baha'is began to build elementary schools, one for boys and one for girls, as was the custom in those days, a Baha'i library, a hostel for visitors, an auditorium, and, in 1902 they undertook the construction of the first Baha'i House of Worship in the world. As evidence of the growing prestige of the Faith, the Czar sent General Krapatkin, the governor-general of Turkistan, to represent the House of Romanov at the laying of the foundation stone. Under Abdu'l-Baha's instructions, a Baha'i named Haji Mirza Muhammad-Taqi, a cousin of the Bab, was directed to personally oversee [the] erection of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar. Muhammad-Taqi dedicated his entire fortune to the project. The Baha'is also established their own cemetary in Ishqabad. At this same time, they created their own journal, called "Sun of the East" and written in Persian. The local assembly had between 12 and 16 members who were elected for terms of about 5 years. Things were going so well that Abdu'l-Baha had to warn the Ishqabad believers not to make too much progress too swiftly lest it provoke problems for the Baha'is in Persia. Meanwhile, construction of the House of Worship progressed slowly. It was expensive and funding was always a problem as was buying all the necessary building materials. In the end, it required about 19 years to complete the work, and the Temple was not completed until 1922.

Although it was not immediately apparent, the bubble burst with the Russian Revolution of 1917. At first it seemed as if the Bolshevik takeover might work to the advantage of the Baha'is. Though the czarist government had been tolerant of Baha'i activities, it was cruel and depotic. The Bolsheviks promised an end to the erratic tyranny of the czarist regime. And it seemed as if even greater freedoms were within reach. Up until the revolution, the Baha'is were forbidden to teach among the native Russian population. They could, and did, convert Muslims, and import members of their own Faith. It was illegal, under czarist law, for anyone born into an Eastern Orthodox family, to convert to any non-Christian religion. After the first Revolution broke out in February, 1917, the czarist rules vanished, and Baha'is began teaching among Russians, Armenian and Caucasian peoples. The Bolsheviks tolerated this and did not interfere. Ishqabad was thousands of miles away from the center of the revolution in northern Russia.

When the fighting ended in victory for the Bolsheviks, the Baha'is sent a delegation of believers to Moscow, the site chosen as the new capitol of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The Baha'is assured the members of the new government they could be trusted:

loyalty to government was a cardinal Baha'i principal, they explained. The Bolsheviks, busy consolidating their powers, listened and made no objections. During the four year period from 1918 to 1922, Baha'is held open public meetings with as many as 400 people in attendance to proclaim the Faith. Local assemblies flourished as far north as Moscow and Leningrad. The Bolsheviks, knowing that Baha'is were routinely persecuted in Persia, hoped to use the Faith as the cutting edge for their revolutionary ideals, spreading these to India. Things began to go sour when the Baha'is refused to allow themselves to be exploited as carriers of Bolshevik ideology.

As the relations between the still-growing Baha'i community in Russia and the newly installed Communist started cooling, the Baha'is sent a new delegation to Moscow. Mr. Kazemzadeh was a member of that party. In a meeting with a government official, the Communist bureaucrat candidly told the Baha'is he was not all all worried about supplanting the influence of the Christians and Muslims in Russia. And then he added, "Frankly, you are more dangerous than the others." In 1922, the official gazette of the new communist government published an article in which it accused the Baha'is of turning the thoughts of the Russian youth away from Bolshevik ideals and toward their own religion. The Baha'i efforts would have to be stopped, the article stated. Baha'i meetings in Moscow and Leningrad were broken up by the police and believers arrested. In Ishqabad, the recently finished House of Worship was seized as state property and the Baha'is were forced to sign a contract to rent it for their own use. The Baha'i community of Ishqabad, now numbering about 2,000 strong, began to feel the full weight of government repression.

During 1927 and 1928, the Russian Baha'is in Moscow were arrested and imprisoned. There followed sporadic incidents of more arrests, banishments to Siberia (reviving a czarist practice) and, in the case of some Persian Baha'is exile back to their native land. In 1933, the Baha'is of Ishqabad were forced to sign a new, five-year lease of the House of Worship. They were allowed to meet there but, public teaching of the Faith was forbidden. Publication of "Sun of the East" was barred and the printing press which produced it was seized by police authorities. In 1937, with the onset of the Stalinist purges, things grew much worse. Thousands of Russians were rounded up and shipped off to forced labor camps in the polar regions of Siberia. In Ishqabad, 280 Baha'is were arrested and most were put on trains heading for Siberia. The lucky ones were expelled back to Persia. A handful of Baha'is, accused of being spies for England (a favorite dununciatory tactic during Stalinist times) were executed. Josef Stalin died in 1953, after a massive stroke. And

although the systematic, oppression eased, the Baha'i community of Ishqabad was broken. In 1938, the House of Worship was taken over by Soviet authorities, who converted it into an art gallery. Ten years later it was severly damaged in an earthquake and had to be demolished as a structural hazard. A few Baha'is, released from concentration camps in Siberia, trickled back to Ishqabad. And, although the Communist authorities allowed them to have meetings, public teaching remained banned, nor was it permitted to re-form the local assembly. Today, there still exists the remnant of a Baha'i community in Ishqabad, but it is cut off from contact with the Baha'i world at large. Under Soviet rule, the Baha'is were never persecuted as subversive to the state, but were oppressed for the reason that they presented too strong and too valid a competition for the atheistic ideals of the Communist cause.

NEXT CLASS: the long postponed calamity will be upon us at 3 pm, Saturday, March 19. Greg Wahlstrom, who has gathered the material for this session (presumably that meas stockpiling an array of nuclear arms and other exotic weapons) will present the class. For those of you hoping to purchase one-way tickets to Tierra del Fuego, off the coast of Argentina, sorry, we're all sold out. After Greg's presentation, we will break the fast together (assuming anyone still has the stomach to eat) with a potluck supper, so those of you planning to attend, please bring food. The class will be at Tony's apartment [Ed. address follows]. It might also be nice for some of you to show up early and help Tony put the finishing touches on the fallout shelter he is building.

NEXT NEXT CLASS: will be our regular time, 2 pm, Sunday, April 3. It will be at Carol Alston's house, but since she is moving, we don't know where it will be yet. Watch this space for further developments. We've asked Mr. Kazemzadeh to return as our speaker, this time to give us what amounts to a short history of Baha'i persecution in Iran. Mr. Kazemzadeh served as defense counsel at a famous trial of Baha'is in Yazd. PS please bear in mind that these newsletters are no longer free. Those of you on our mailing list are asked to pony up $1 a month (cheap at twice the price, gang) to keep getting them. Otherwise, we'll cut you off the list. Honest.

[Ed. what follows is the analysis of Dr. Denis MacEoin of the sources for the words of the Central Figures of the Faith]

ANALYSIS OF SOURCES FOR THE WORDS OF BAB, BAHA'U'LLAH, AND ABDU'L-BAHA Denis MacEoin

WORDS OF THE BAB

Written by His Own hand (from Baha'i sources)
Written by His Own hand (from Azali sources)
Written by His Own hand (from Muslim sources)
Written by Amanuenses at His dictation (from all above sources, and also from European sources)
Related in Babi histories
Related in Muslim histories
Related in "neutral" histories
Related by contemporary Babis in letters, etc.
Related in contemporary documents by non-Baha'is
Related in later memoirs by contemporaries or their descendants
Quoted by Baha'u'llah
Quoted by Abdu'l-Baha
Quoted by Mirza Yahza [Ed. Subhi-Azal]

WORDS OF BAHA'U'LLAH

Written by His Own hand (from Baha'i sources)
Written by His Own hand (from other sources)
Written down by Abdu'l-Baha
Written down by Mirza Aqa Jan
Written down by other amenuenses
Written down by any amenuensis and transcribed by Zaynu'l-Muqarribin
Written down by contemporaries and recorded in letters, etc.
Written down by contemporaries and recorded in later memoirs
Written down by contemporaries and recorded by their descendants
Written down by contemporaries and authenticated by Abdu'l-Baha or the Guardian
Related in Baha'i histories
Related in non-Baha'i histories
Related in contemporary documents from non-Baha'i sources
Quoted by Abdu'l-Baha (in any of the following ways)

WORDS OF ABDU'L-BAHA

Written by His Own hand (from Baha'i sources)
Written by His Own hand (from other sources)
Written down by amenuenses
Recorded in Kitab-i-Badayl'ul-Athar (Mahmud's Diary)
Recorded from talks and collated by the Local Spiritual Assemby of Tihran
Noted down roughly when spoken
Recorded in translation without the original
Recorded in newspapers
Recorded by contemporaries in letters, etc.
Recorded by contemporaries in later memoirs
Recorded by descendants of contemporaries
Recorded by contemporaries and authenticated by the Guardian

(Note also Risaliy-i-Tisa Ashariyya written by Sohrab but amended and corrected by Abdu'l-Baha)

WORDS FROM OTHER SOURCES IN THE WRITINGS OF BAHA'U'LLAH

From authetic scriptures (eg the Bayan, the Qur'an)
From the Gospels – Words of Jesus
From the Gospels – other portions
From the rest of the New Testament
From the Old Testament
From the Bible, but altered from the original
From Hadith (tradition) attributed to Muhammad
From Hadith attributed to an Imam
From other traditions
From Hadith Qudsi
From philosophers, mystics, poets, etc.
From words of believers (eg Haji Shaykh Muhammd Ali)
From words of enemies
From words of Covenant-Breakers
From words of enquirers
From words of the Bab, in Baha'u'llah's Own Words (ie, not recorded by the Bab)
From words of Jesus and other Prophets (not previously recorded)

(Also note passages attributing words to allegorical personifications such as “the True Faith”, “Trustworthiness” or “All Created Things”; passages which purport to “quote” the words of the “infidels”, etc.; passages taking the form of a dialogue between Baha’u’llah and God; passages appearing to have been written by Mirza Aqa Jan.)

[END DOCUMENT]

Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#12]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

With this edition of the newsletter, the LA class seems to go into uncharted territory. Where before they boldly broached taboo subjects, now they have hit the mother of all taboo subjects: a direct critique of an institution. Its interesting to note that the editorial which sparks this whole discussion (about the failure to reach goals) could be written right now in any number of Baha´i communities. This critique of the NSA is also telling as years later (much later), the UHJ itself was noticeably upset with the NSA of the US and wrote them a scathing letter, in the hopes that the Baha´i community of the US would get the message and clean up its own house.

The resulting uncomfortable reaction that such criticism creates is also familiar. Most Baha´is defend the institutions (no matter what wrong they have done) by saying that they are in their embryonic form and therefore we must simply endure until they mature and develop. But if we accept this child to adult analogy, then its corollary must be that a child needs interaction; to be nourished, sheltered, educated, etc. Not isolated in a bubble, separate from the world at large. So unless those who propose this analogy are implying that we should leave babies to their own devices, it then follows that it is our responsability to interact with the institutions. And yes, some of these interactions will take the form of critiques to let them know that we believe what they are doing or have done is incorrect. To

do otherwise would be to isolate them from the very community which they are shepheardings.

Finally there is some good natured and light-hearted banter about persecutions. But unknown to the class members at that time, it eerily foreshadows the great upheaval that took place but a few years from the time of this class and led, again, to the persecution of Baha'is in Iran.

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70´s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]

[Ed. personal home address]
March 19, 1977

Dear Baha'i Friends:

Well, hello again, folks! Before we get started, you will note that an extra page has been added to the end of this report. It is an agenda for the Baha'i Studies Seminar which is to be held at the University of Lancaster in England from April 16th to 17th. It's still not too late to buy a ticket and fly over. We are hoping to get copies of the papers presented at this seminar for the class.

Correction Department: Some errors cropped up in the last letter which summarized Mr. Kazemzadeh's presentation on the Baha'i Community of Ishqabad. Altho[ugh] they are minor points, the corrections are listed here in the interest of historical accuracy. It was the Czarist government, not Czar Alexander III himself, who sent the military tribunal to Ishqabad to try the Muslim slayers of Muhammad Rida (Rida is pronounced as if it were "Reza" with the "d" sound as in the word Ridvan). While the trial proved an important milestone for the Baha'is, it was hardly the kind of thing to command the Czar's personal attention.

Also, the Muhammad Rida who was assasinated by the Muslim fanatics was not the same Muhammad Rida, a cousin of the Bab, who first suggested to Baha'u'llah that Baha'is emigrate from Persia to Ishqabad. Both men, however, did have the same name, hence the

confusion. There were two Muhammad Rida's, the first who proposed the colonization of Ishqabad by Baha'is, and the second, a prominent resident of the city, who was martyred. You got all that, right?

And, during the course of the trial, the Muslims accused of the murder, justified their actions on the grounds that Muhammd Rida was a Baha'i and had insulted the Imams, testifying on the assumption that they would not be convicted of killing an infidel. There was never any doubt about who committed the act, the only question at issue was the criminality of it.

The spelling of the Czarist governor-general of the Turkistan area was given as Krupatkin (which is how Shoghi Effendi spelled it in God Passes By). However, "Kuropotkin" was cited as a possible correct spelling. You take your choice. (Don't bother to pay.)

And . . . on page 3 of the notes it states that until the Russian Revolution broke out, Baha'is were forbidden (under the law) to teach their Faith to Ishqabad's "native" Russian population. Before its conquest in the 1800′s, Ishqabad was a Persian village. When the Russians took over, many Russians and others moved in and built a large city. So, technically there was no "native" Russian population in the city of Ishqabad. (Bob Ballanger, who made those mistakes, has been exiled to Siberia, for a five-year term of hard labor, teaching Muslim fanatics.)

Due to circumstances beyond our control (as they say on television when things go a bit wack-o) our class scheduled on the Calamity had to be postponed at the last minute. It has been rescheduled for May 15th (assuming the real thing doesn't happen before then). The cancellation of our class presentation put us in a large, deep hole. After fumbling around for a while, we stumbled into a protracted and, for many people in the class, uncomfortable discussion of the implications of an editorial entitled, "Gentlemen, the Verdict Please" which appeared in the January, 1977, issue of the American Baha'i [Ed. the national official Baha'i magazine]. If you have that issue, you are advised to read the editorial before proceeding further here. If not, we'll do the best we can to explain it.

Essentially, the editorial pointed out that if the Baha'is were put on trial for pursuing the goals of the Five Year Plan, they could avoid conviction by having their defense councel argue that so little progress has been made toward the goals of the Plan that there is no case. The Baha'is it could be argued, are not really serious about the plan and so pose no

threat to society. By inference, the commentary (which identified no cause of the problem, and proposed no solution) blamed the American Baha'i Community as a whole for the large-scale failure to achieve these goals. That stand raised the hackles of a few class members who had, on their own, written some vigorous dissents and mailed them off to Wilmette. In class, this faction asserted that the editorial wrongly attempts to make the American Baha'i feel guilty for what is happening (or rather, not happening). Instead of pointing the finger at the body of American believers, it was suggested that the real problem with an unresponsive and inept national leadership. Those who took this point of view argued that it is impossible for a situation to exist where the administrative institutions are doing everything right, but the plan is somehow failing miserably. So instead of blaming the American Baha'i Community for the lamentable state of the goals of the plan, we ought to be looking for what is wrong with our leadership. It was suggested that the editorial missed the point by focusing on a symptom and ignoring the disease.

This is a controversial stand and its presentation split calss members into three camps. There were those who, as outlined above, argued the problem is not one of a lack of religious devotion, but of poor leadership. That approach visibly upset some members of the class, one of whom wondered out loud if it could be considered back-biting. This group said that the complaints raised by the first group were harmful in themselves, adding that, instead of solving any problems, they were only making things worse.

That provoked the rebuttal that the idea that one cannot discuss such a topic is an example of the stifling atmosphere which exists within the Baha'i Community today. There is, it was argued, a subtle intimidation which makes it difficult, if not impossible, even to raise the possibility that there might be problems with the way Baha'i institutions are handling the Five Year Plan. This unspoken rule sometimes drives Baha'is into becoming inactive because they see this as the only alternative to risking a confrontation with an administrative body. This causes a feeling of alienation to exist in the Baha'i Community. Individual believers, instead of being cowed silence, ought to be encouraged to express their feelings and offer their ideas. It is up to the local and national administrative institutions to encourage candid comments since they must earn the respect and affection of those they represent.

But those who rejected this line of argument said that the institutions ought to be respected because they come from God through Baha'u'llah, and are divine in nature. It was

suggested that those Baha'is who criticise the national leadership are over-reacting to things they do not understand partly because the collapse of the existing order prevents them from having accurage judgement in this case. Because the Baha'i Cause is still largely embrionic, that is all the more reason for patience on the part of the believers who should not over-react to things which they do not understand. These class members said that they had experienced no lack of good leadership in the Baha'i community and that those who had were only relating personal experiences which were not shared by most of the American Community.

A third faction then surfaced. It was composed of those who sat impatiently while the first two groups spoke. Members of the third camp said the discussion was entirely too personal and unstructured, ading that, if there was a legitimate topic at hand, it ought to be taken up within the research confines imposed on all presentations. "It is not worth it to just come here and toss around ideas," as one person put it. "If this is a class, it ought to operate on a specific topic." Continuing along that line, it was argued that we were just having a gripe session which was a waste of time, since we could take no action as a group on the problem. Whereupon some countered that the class did not exist to pour knowledge into empty vessels, but to spark new insights and discuss new approaches and points of view. The Baha'i Community should provide an important atmosphere in which all points of view can be aired and the individual's right of self-expression is not abridged, they said.

FUTURE CLASSES: Back by popular demand, Mr. Kazemzadeh will address the class at 2pm on Sunday, April 3rd at Tony Lee's apartment [Ed. home address follows]. He will discuss the persecution of Baha'is in Iran, especially a case in which he was personally involved some years ago when the entire Local Spiritual Assembly of Yazd was arrested and charged with murder. We will also ask him about the more recent persecutions which took place in 1955. So we will have the benefit of first person recollections ofboth of these events.

Since it is passover that night, one of the Baha'is from a Jewish background will lead us in a secular Seder (Passover Service). This will be followed by dinner. (Are you ready for all this, folks?) (Anyone who converts to Judaism during the service will be executed as a heretic.)

April 17th, at 2 pm (a Sunday) Dr. Banani will address the class on the nature of the classification of religious scripture in the Baha'i Faith and other religions. Both Anthony

Lee and Denis MacEoin have proposed categorizations of Baha'i Scripture in these pages. They were only poorely understood by most (who are still partial to Pilgrim's Notes) . We look forward to Dr. Banani to tie this all together.

Saturday, April 30th will be "A Baha'i Theory of Personality", Bonnie Barnes long-awaited presentation on how the Faith affects the lives and outlook of its followers. The time and place of this event will be announced.

Run and grab your crash helmets, compose your will, kiss your loved ones good-bye and pay back any outstanding debts: at 2 pm, Sunday, May 15th, the Calamity (at long last) will be upon us. Greg Wahlstrom, who has been uttering a string of evil-sounding cackles as he compiled his research, will let us know what the Writings say about the Calamity. The class will be held at the Wahlstrom's home [Ed. personal home address and phone number follows].

AND THERE IS MORE . . . In direct response to the outbursts of our last class, Susan Berkman will discuss the relationship between the Local Assembly and the individual at 2 pm on Sunday, May 29th. Time and location to be announced later.

NASTY REMINDER DEPT.: All right, gang, as we've written before these class summaries are no longer free and haven't been since January. Duplication and mailing costs are considerable. The cost for each subscription is $1.00 per month. Send you moolah to Tony Lee [Ed. personal address follows]. Failure to pay has already got some people off the mailing list. Don't be next.

[Ed. the following is the schedule and itinerary for the Baha'i Studies Seminar which was held at the University of Lancaster in England from April 16-17th 1977]

University of Lancaster
Department of Religious Studies, Department of Sociology
Baha'i Studies SeminarSaturday 16th and Sunday 17th April, 1977

All sessions will be held in the Chaplaincy Centre (Quiet Room).

P R O G R A M M E

Saturday, 16th April

2:00 – 3:15 Denis MacEoin (Cambridge) “The late 18th Century reformation in Shi’ism: its background and influence”

3:15 – 3:45 Tea

3:45 – 5:00 Johanna de Groot (York) “The Shaykism of Kerman”

5:00 – 6:00 Shaykhism – general discussion

Sunday, 17th April

10:00 – 11:15 Moojan Momen “Some problems connected with the Yazd episode of 1850″

11:15 – 11:45 Coffee

11:45 – 1:00 Peter Smith (Lancaster) “The routinization of charisma”. Some comments on Peter L. Serger’s Motif messianique et processus social dans le Bahaism.

1:00 – 2:30 Lunch

2:30 – 3:45 Kent Beveridge (Vienna) “Social aspects of the Guardianship”.

3:45 – 4:15 Tea

4:15 – 5:30 Discussion of the last three papers.

5:30 – 6:30 “Baha’i Studies” – general discussion

Further copies of the programme and registration forms can be obtained from the seminar convener:

Peter Smith,
Department of Sociology,
University of Lancaster,
Bailrigg,
Lancaster

to whom any queries concerning the seminar should be referred.

[END DOCUMENT]

Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#13]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

This edition of the newsletter will rival the best written episodes of Law & Order. I can just see the scene in my mind's eye: the courtroom, the throng of people, the surprise ending. . . but I'm getting ahead of you since you haven't read it yet.

Notice that from the way they are talking about the treatment of Baha'is in Iran during their time (1977) there was a marked improvement in their lot. This can be deduced from what is said, as well as what is not said. At the time of this LA study class, it had been more than 20 years since Baha'is had been systematically persecuted and martyred for their Faith. In fact, Baha'is of that time in Iran enjoyed many freedoms and were literally thriving in this new and friendly atmosphere. Some of them even held positions of privilege and prominence in government and industry.

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]

[Ed. personal home address]
April 11, 1977

LAST GASP DEPARTMENT (Ishqabad Division): Okay, this is it. Positively the last correction to our original Ishqabad appears below. Although it is embarassing to have to correct a correction we ran last time, we must do it. Here we go. The person who urged Baha'u'llah to approve the migration of Baha'is to Ishqabad was not, as reported Haji Muhammad Rida. The man's correct name is Siyyid Muhsin, a relative of the Bab (Afnan).

Muhammad Rida was a Baha'i living in Ishqabad (a representative of this Afnan) who was stabbed to death in the city's bazaar by Muslim fanatics. Baha'u'llah refers to this murder, by the way, in Epistle to the Son of the Wolf. Also, it was Siyyid Muhsin, and not Baha'u'llah Himself who wrote to Iran to urge Baha'is to emigrate to southern Russia. Baha'u'llah had personally approved this course of action, however. One more thing. Volkov, the Russian architect of the House of Worship at Ishqabad, (also spelled Volkoff) was given a Baha'i funeral when he died. Abdu'l-Baha sent a tablet praising the architect and saying that by building a great edifice for the Baha'is on earth, he had constructed himself a palace in heaven.

NEXT CLASS DEPARTMENT: The next class will be held at the apartment of Carol Alston [Ed. personal home address and directions follow]. The speaker will be Dr. Amin Banani who will give a short lecture on the question of authenticity in religious scriptures. [Ed. hand written note: Sunday April 17 at 3 pm]

SPINOFF DEPARTMENT: Susan Berkman, Sid Morrison and Anthony Lee are beginning a new deepening class on the Baha'i Faith which will be more oriented toward basic principles, concepts and teachings that this one is and is especially recommended for new Baha'is. Of course, even Basic Concepts can be discussed in depth and those looking for a shallow performance are warned away. The class will begin at 8 pm on Friday, April 15 (to coincide with your income tax deadline) at the home of Sidney and Karen Morrison [Ed. personal home address and phone number follows]. The subsequent classes will be held at the same time and place every Friday night. The first of a series of nine classes will be on establishing a personal relationship with Baha'u'llah.

WE HAVE GOT TO GET ORGANIZED AROUND HERE DEPARTMENT: At our last meeting we decided . . . to volunteer Paula Wahlstrom as the group's treasurer. Although we have established $1 a month as the charge for these letters, we have been having problems with people either not mailing in any money, or just mailing in $1 and assuming that covers everything. It doesn't.
So . . . from now on, to continue receiving these letters you will have to subscribe for six months at a time. That will be $6. Persons living outside the United States are exempted from this charge altogether. Paula is going to keep books, so everyone better pay up.

DOWN TO BUSINESS DEPARTMENT: At our last class, Mr. Kazemzadeh spoke to us about his personal recollections of persecution of the Baha'is in Iran in the early 1950′s. He

was one of the defense lawyers in a famous trial which involved several Baha'is, including all members of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Yazd.

In 1949, an impoverished washer woman named Mrs. Soghra and five of her children were found murdered in the Persian village of Abarqu, in the district of Yazd. The woman was a Muslim and one newspaper in Tehran reported the story immediately, implicating a wealthy landlord in the district as the guilty party. It seems that this woman had acted as a matchmaker for a woman that the landlord wanted to marry, but had arranged her marriage to someone else. The newspapers printed the story that was furious and so hired assassins to kill Mrs. Soghra. Another newspaper stody also implicated this same landlord but reported that he had lured one of the children to his house, and had raped her there, later ordering the murders to cover up his crime.

Meanwhile, legal authorities began investigating the murder. After conducting a hurried probe, the prosecuting-investigator (those two roles are combined into one office in Iran) had three people arrested for the crime, but the landlord was not one of them. However, the superficial nature of the investigation left so many questions unanswered, that the odor of cover-up was strong in the air. Reopening the probe, the prosecutor announced that, though at first he had been baffled by the motivation for the crime, "the doors of heaven suddenly opened before my eye" and he "realized" that the murders had a religious basis. Before this, none of these events had any connection with the Baha'is of Yazd.

But determined to find something – anything – on which to base a case, the prosecutor, another attorney and the Chief Justice of Yazde district began to direct their attention to Baha'is. Using Gestapo interview tactics, including outright torture, they got a variety of stories, but settled on one in which three men were reported to have come from the village of Isfandabad and committed the crime. Isfandabad, as it happened, had a small Baha'i population. Three Baha'is were arrested there by the police for alleged involvement in the murders of Soghra and her children. Eventhough witnesses told authorities that the three men taken into custody were not in town when the crime took place, the trio was carted off to jail to await trial. Also arrested by the police was an old man, in his 70′s, Abbas Ali, a Baha'i pioneer and travelling teacher in the area near Abarqu. Because he had been give money by the Local Assembly of Yazd and sent to the area, all nine members of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Yazd were also arrested. In all, 18 persons, were arrested and held for trial.

Ordinarily, in a felony crime such as this, the murder of Mrs. Soghra would have been held in Kirman, [Ed. also spelled: Kerman] the administrative center of Yazd district. But, the wealthy landlord succeeded in having the trial transfered to Tehran, where he had considerable political influence. In Persian criminal trials, there is no jury. A five member judicial panel hands down a verdict. These judges are employees of the state and can be dismissed at any time.

The trial of the 18 defendants (17 of them Baha'is) did not begin until almost three years after the murder, in 1952. During much of this time, the defendants were in jail, awaiting trial. The trial itself was held in a near-circus atmosphere, in a huge courtroom with 700-800 spectators on hand. Newspapers began writing stories and articles hostile towards the Baha'is. Leaflets were handed out to spectators at the trial denouncing the Baha'is and their defense attorneys. Mr. Kazemzadeh recalled that one leaflet said: "If the court and judges do not punish these shameless killers of our innocent Muslim sister and her five children, or if they postpone or delay carrying out the death penalty, we, the brave sons of Islam, will ourselves send to hell all these criminal Baha'is."

The five defense attorney prepared their cases in an atmosphere of barely suppressed terror. Three of them were Baha'is (including Mr. Kazemzadeh) and two were Muslims. Every day they had to be escorted to the courtroom and out again by a flying wedge of young Baha'i bodyguards. One attorney, a Muslim, caved in to the pressure and withdrew from the case, citing poor health. There were ten attorneys on the other side who jockeyed for notice and were eager for the trial to begin.

Reading from his indictment, the prosecutor opened the trial by attacking the Baha'i Faith and accusing the Baha'is of fifty years of bloodshed in Iran which had crippled the progress of the nation. He told the audience that he would settle for nothing less than the most severe punishment in this case. His opening statement was so inflammatory that all of the defense attorneys, including Mr. Kazemzadeh, resigned from the case, charging a mistrial. The Chief Justice responded by appointing two of them as court-designated counsel (from which they could not withdraw) and was ready to proceed. The other attorneys withdrew their resignations and the trial went on.

The other prosecuting attorneys followed. Two or three of them argued the facts of the case, but most of them concentrated their remarks on the Baha'i Faith in general. Their statements provoked a steady stream of outbursts and demonstrations from in the

courtroom, which the presiding judge made no effort to halt. Charges were freely levelled that Baha'is were disloyal to the nation and believed in killing people to spread their Faith.

At last, the defense attorneys had their turn. The began refuting the charges that the Baha'is advocated or practiced violence, but were soon interrupted by the presiding judge. All that, he ruled was irrelevant to the case. The attorneys would have to confine their examination to the murder and not refute charges made against the Baha'i Faith. After three weeks of trial, all defendants were found guilty as charged. Three Baha'i peasants from Isfandabad who had been "identified" under torture as the murderers were sentenced to death. The old pioneer, Abbas Ali, who during the course of the trial had denied that the was a Baha'i, was sentenced to ten years at hard labor. Then, making the extraordinary statement that it was well known that no Baha'i would take any important action without consulting his Local 'Spiritual Assembly, the court (on that evidence alone) found all nine members of the Yazd Assembly guilty as co-conspirators to the crime. They were sentenced to, from three to ten years, hard labor.

But in this haste to condemn, the judges made a legal error. Under Persian law, no one over 70 could be sentenced to ten years at hard labor. Therefore, Abbas Ali's sentence was clearly illegal. On this basis alone, the attorneys could appeal. There was a second trial, which upheld the verdict of the first one, but commuted all of the sentences three years at hard labor.

Those who attended the class were fascinated by Mr. Kazemzadeh's and urged him to tell us something about the much more widespread persecutions which broke out in Iran a few years later in 1955. Space does not permit a full summary of those remarks.

Mr. Kazemzadeh cautioned us that the events which he recounted took place over twenty years ago in Iran and that conditions for Baha'is have improved a great deal since then. Baha'is are not severly persecuted in Iran now, though the possiblity of new outbreaks can not be denied. He explained that in the early 1950′s Iran was in a state of near anarchy, the central government was weak, and the Shah almost powerless. This unstable state of affairs provided the atmosphere in which persecution could erupt.

[END DOCUMENT]

Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#14]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

Authenticity of the Baha´i texts isn´t as simple as one would initially think. After all the assumption is that since the Baha´i Faith is such a young religion and since all of the texts were authenticated personally by the Manifestation, there should be no qualms at all about this issue.

Fortunately, the truth is somewhat different. Fortunate, because it gives scholars an opportunity for some original research and thought. If you are interested in an example of such dialogue, you may want to check out Talisman´s discussion of "The Promulgation of Universal Peace" in the first week of January 2005 (check the archives).

On a different note, but same topic, I read recently an interesting article about scholars working on authenticating Quranic text based on very, very old copies of the Quran. Since the Quran has been transcribed over many generations by hand, there are some errors that have inevitable crept in. These scholars made a find of historical proportions where they unearthed, behind a mosque wall, a Quran cemetary.

That is, a place where old copies of the Quran, worn out from use, were deposited. This is an ancient tradition due to the extreme respect that Muslims place for the physical word of God. It would be unthinkable to simply discard or burn or in any other way dispose of the Quran. Anyway, thanks to this ancient custom these scientists discovered a treasure trove of very ancient Qurans which allowed them to slowly create a timeline and trace back any and all changes over the years.

Needless to mention, such a scholarly work is extremely dangerous because Muslims can be rather prickly when you suggest that their text came through any other form than pure descent or revelation from God (and what religion isn´t?). I found this article extremely interesting because it is a commonly known thing that the Quran is little understood today.

Some say this is because it was written in a very ancient version of Arabic. This new theory states that maybe we don´t understand it because some scribe wrote down the wrong letter or word. I´ll try to find it and post it if I can (in the meantime if you know what I´m referring to, reply with the link please and help us all out).

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]

[Ed. personal home address]
April 17, 1977

Dear Baha'i Friends –

As part of our class newsletters last December and earlier this year, and then mostly as a side issue, Tony Lee and Denis MacEoin, one of our English correspondents, offered their own classification system of Baha'i Writings. Their reason for compiling these outlines was to rank the relative importance of statements attributed to or written by the Central Figures of the Faith, the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice. Such a ranking is important because, for example, remarks jotted down by Baha'i visitors to Israel when in the presence of Shoghi Effendi have come to be known as pilgrim's notes and have no authenticity nor binding affect at all.

Lee and MacEoin were careful to point out that the rankings they made separately were their own invention and represented, by no means, the last word in this area. MacEoin further cautioned that his own order of authenticity was formulated several years ago and, where he to do it again, he would make some changes. (At this point, it would be helpful for those who have been with us long enough to have compiled a backlog of past newsletter issues to trot out the ones relevant to this discussion. You more recent arrivals will just have to suffer through.)

When Lee and MacEoin submitted their outlines to the class both invited comments to the proposals. Our Baha'i study class of April 17 heard one such commentary from Dr. Amin Banani. Here is a summary of what he said.

In both outlines, a process of establishing historical authenticity (hence reliability) has been mixed up with the concept of Divine authority as it is reflected in the Baha'i Writings. While authenticity and authority are related, they are not the same. Using one (that is, establishing authenticity) to measure the other (religious authority) is a risky business. For example, the MacEpoin outline lists 13 classifications for the words of the Bab, the most authentic (and authoritative) being those words written by the Bab Himself that are quoted in the Baha'i sources. Ranked 11th in the MacEoin hierarchy are the words of the Bab as quoted by Baha'u'llah. MacEoin has given greater reliability, for example, to utterances of the Bab when they appear in Muslim histories, "neutral" histories and contemporary documents written by non-Babis than it credits Baha'u'llah with having. Dr. Banani said it seems to him Baha'u'llah quoting the Bab is to be regarded as more authoritative than remarks of the Bab cited, for example, in the "neutral" histories MacEoin ranks higher. Continuing his analysis, Dr. Banani went on to say:

The Lee and MacEoin outlines set up gradations of relative authenticity by ranking Baha'i writings in an order of importance. The underlying assumption is that such a hierarchy sets out the authority and importance of each source. While attempts such as those offered by Lee and MacEoin are interesting and thought provoking, it is up to Baha'i administrative institutions, specifically, the Universal House of Justice, to make decisions about how authentic (and therefore reliable) various Baha'i works are. Rating which writings are more valid or less valid is not up to individual Baha'is, no matter how well intentioned and sincere they are.

Efforts to determine authenticity (and thereby judge authority) are not new with the Bah'ai Faith. Judaism, Christianity and Islam have all been subjected to this same inquiry. What such efforts boil down to is a question of: How do we distinguish between the Words of God and the words of man? Taking Islam, as an example, the tone and style of the Quran have convinced some Muslim scholars there is, on God's part, a "Divine preference for the Arabic language." This assumption has become part of a fundamentalist credo in Islam. Since the Quran was written in Arabic, there are, in Muslim views, prohibitions against translating the Holy Book into other languages. But, this interdiction, rather than hampering the spread of Islam, instead has served to make Arabic the "lingua franca" of the Muslim world. Once knowledgeable in Arabic, a necessity for reading the Quran, the languge becomes the common tongue for Muslims from different areas to communicate with each other.

The whole notion of how God communicates to man through a prophet relates to the twin subjects of classification and authenticity of religious scripture. The history of religion is a history of God revealing His Will through some chosen instrument. Baha'is call this a manifestation. These people must use words to convey God's message as revealed to them. It is from this transformation (Will of God into words of prophet) that the whole idea of the "creative word" comes into being. (Still with us here gang?) The beginning of the act of divine creation often is described in terms of an oral command, a word or set of words. Verses in the Quran frequently begin with the command: "Say!" (Near the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis I, chapter 3, it reads "And God said, 'Let there be light:' and there was light.") Baha'u'llah affirms this concept of the creative word, saying it is proof of the validity of religious revelation.

FOLLOW-UP DEPT. During our general comment section, Dr. Banani was asked what particular significance the Yazd incident and trial (see April 6 newsletter) played in the Baha'i history of modern Iran. He replied that there was nothing very noteworthy about the entire matter except that it occured at the close of a period of relatice calm that existed in Persian from the 1920′s up through the 1940′s, when the Baha'is were left pretty much alone. But the arrest and 1952 kangaroo-court trial of more than a dozen Baha'is on trumped up charges of murder set off a "realization that, at any time, abridgement of their human rights could take place," Dr. Banani said.

[END DOCUMENT]

Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#15]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

In this edition of the newsletter we can see the old style of deepening or study classes. And in turn, contrast it with the mindnumbing Ruhi version that has replaced it. For those who

simply don't remember such discussions (maybe you're too young or maybe you were not around the Baha'i community when they were the norm) will notice that these two forms are markedly different.

Where Ruhi is black and white (basically telling you the answer and then demanding that you repeated back several times), this sort of deepening is much more open ended, with very few absolute answers. To some that might seem uncomfortable. It is awkward not knowing exactly what something means or what the Writings are telling us to do. It takes a much more developed mind to entertain differing possibilities and to mull even contrasting answers. Although it may be comforting, to bask in the glow of such absolute environments is to basically turn off your critical thinking abilities and to shirk from your God given responsability to investigate the truth independantly.

Which brings me to repeat that this is one of the main reasons that I'm going to the trouble of unearthing these newsletters. To remind Baha'is that this is the way we used to do it and that there is a better (much better way, in fact).

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]

[Ed. personal home address]
May 1, 1977

Dear Baha'i Friends –

APOLOGY DEPT.: Our class on "A Baha'i Theory of Personality," to be presented by Bonnie Barnes, had to be postponed because of a scheduling foulup. Barnes was told the class was to be on Saturday, April 30 (a date also listed in a previous newsletter). Originally, the class was to be held on that Saturday to avoid conflicting with any local plans for celebrating the 12th Day of Ridvan. But, the 12th Day of Ridvan fell on a Monday, so we slated the class for Sunday, May 1, however Barnes was told her presentation woudl be made Saturday and showed up then. You got all that, right? Anyhow, we hope to re/schedule her topic for a future class.

Tony Lee stepped into the breach with a backup class based on the outline the Los Angeles Local Spiritual Assembly prepared last year on the meaning of Baha'i deepening. Ten years ago, in a Ridvan message, members of the Universal House of Justice wrote that the sort of understanding they wanted the Baha'i of the world to acquire centered on the answers to four questions: What is Baha'u'llah's purposefor the human race? For what ends did He submit to the appaling cruelties and indignities heaped upon Him? What does He mean by a "new race of men"? What are the profound changes which He will bring about? Interestingly, the House members noted that the worldwide establishment of universal education, adequate medical care and a high standard of living for all was not the sort of thing that formed the object of Baha'u'llah's mission. These ideals are, in one form or another, Baha'i social principles and, as such, are frequently presented at Baha'i firesides as more or less constituting the Faith.

Although our class got as far as the first question (What is Baha'u'llah's purpose for the human race?), it became evident, even from the beginning, this would be a different study class from previous sessions. Those of you who have attended our classes or read about them in these reports have gotten the impression the sessions tend to be intellectual in orientation. This class, however, was more spiritual in its approach. It was not an easy transition for us to make. We often found ourselves slogging along, sometimes near absolute bafflement, in trying to unravel a particular mystery embedded in the Baha'i Revelation. It was one of the most challenging, frustrating classes we've ever had. The first major hurdle we encountered was dealing with the implications lying behind the realization that Baha'u'llah's mission is to originate, promote and produce an organic, fundamental change in the nature of human society.

We all have our concepts, however hazy and half baked they may be, of what the New World Order will look like. A poll of the Baha'is might turn up responses like "no more wars," "total international cooperation" and "a collective effort to solve the physical and social ills of mankind." As mentioned earlier, the Universal House of Justice has said none of these conceptions are even close to the truth. But what was even more startling and difficult for class members to adjust to as we got into our topic was the notion that most human history, including such momentus trends as the conversion from predominantly agrarian to an industrial economy, the rise of applied science and the influence of nationalism were only superficial human adjustments when viewed in the light of what is coming.

Things became more difficult for us as we grappled with the mystical and eliptical tone and style of Baha'u'llah's writings surveying His purpose for mankind. Consider this passage:

> When the channel of the human soul is cleansed of all worldly and impeding attachments, it will unfailingly perceive the breath of the Beloved across immesureable distances, and will, led by its perfume, attain and enter the City of Certitude. Therein he will discern the wonders of His ancient wisdom, and will perceive all the hidden teachings from teh rustling leaves of the Tree — which flourisheth in that city. With both his inner and his outer ear he will hear from its dust the hymns of flory and praise ascending unto the Lord of Lords, and with his inner eye will he discover the mysteries of "return" and "revival". How unspeakably glorious are the signs, the tokens, the revelations, and splendours which He Who is the King of names and attributes hath destined for that City! The attainment of this City quencheth thirst without water, and kindleth the love of God of an inscrutable widsom, and upon every rosebush a myriad nightingales pour out, in blissful rapture, their melody. Its wondrous tulips unfold the mystery of the Burning Bush, and its sweet savours of holiness breathe the perfume fo the Messianic Spirit. It bestoweth wealth without gold, and conferreth immortality without death. In every leaf ineffable delights are treasured, and within every chamber unnumbered mysteries lie hidden.

Kitab-i-Iqan, pp.197-198

Using the metaphor of entering the "City of Certitude," Baha'u'llah writes that "The attainment of this City quencheth thirst without water, and kindleth the love of God without fire. . . . It bestoweth wealth without gold, and conferreth immortality without death." To Western minds, trained to follow an orderly progression of logical ideas, this is contradictory and impossible as well as mystical and abstruse.

The paradox Baha'u'llah poses in this passage is repeated elsewhere — in fact, it is one of the Manifestation's favorite literary devices — and soon it becomes evident that Baha'u'llah employes a style of conscious contradiction and deliberate inconsistency. This can make it even toughter to understand His meaning. Take another example, more clear in style, but still based on paradox, such as this one from Gleanings, page 99:

> "The Ancient Beauty hath consented to be bound with chains that mankind may be released from its bondage, and hath accepted to be made a prisoner within this most mighty Stronghold that the whole world may attain unto true liberty. He hath drained to its dregs teh cup of sorrow, that the people of the earth may attain unto abiding joy and be filled with gladness."

Out of the almost dozen quotes outlining the purpose for mankind presented in the study guide, we extracted a blizzard of possibilities. To cite just a few: *"The purpose of God in creating man hath been, and will ever be, to enable him to know his Creator and to attain His presence."* (GL. p.70) *"The pupose of the one true God in manifesting Himself is to summon all mankind to truthfulness and sincerity, to piety and trustworthiness, to resignation and submissiveness to the Will of God, to forbearance and kindliness, to uprightness and widsom."* (GL. p.299) *"...He, through, the direct operation of His unconstrained and soverigh Will, chose to confer upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him an dto love Him — a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and primary purpose underlying the whole of creation . . ."* (GL. p.65). *"His purpose, however, is to enable the pure in spirit and the detached in heart to ascend, by virtue of their own innate powers, unto the shores of the Most Great Ocean ..."* (GL. p. 71)

It did not take long for it to become obvious that Baha'u'llah was using symbols — "the City of Certitude," "the Most Great Ocean" — to convey an idea. But symbols, we have been taught, are used to represent something. What we could not unravel was what Baha'u'llah's symbols symbolized. What does He mean by the "City of Certitude"? And how can one "ascend…unto the shores of the Most Great Ocean"? Here again is that paradox! Oceans are low-lying bodies of water. One descends to an ocean, one doesn't "ascend" to its shores.

Class members battled these and related mysteries for a while, but got nowhere. Then it was suggested that Baha'u'llah is trying to communicate something that words alone cannot convey. Contrary to our training and experience, Baha'u'llah does not use words to impart understanding, but instead uses them to inspire insights. Infact, we decided, Baha'u'llah does not use words to convey meaning, but to achieve an emotional and spiritual effect — and that effect is to inspire religious rapture

We ran into trouble because we were searching for the meaning of Baha'u'llah's symbols. It did not occur to any of us, until we met with difficulty in finding that meaning that there may not have been any meaning, at least not as we know it, but that Baha'u'llah's purpose was something else. It may be that Baha'u'llah's use of language is, on some limited scale, a model of what He hopes to do with mankind. The Manifestation transforms language from what we are used to into something quite beyond what we expect. From all indications, this also is what He will do on a larger order with mankind.

NEXT CLASS: Greg Wahlstrom's long-awaited review of the Calamity (it bombed in Peoria …sorry about that), will be our next topic. The class will be held on Saturday, [Ed. hand written note: June 11th] (not Sunday, May 15, as originally announced) at 2 pm. Ground zero…er…the location of the class will be in the Wahlstrom's home shelter in their home at [Ed. home address, directions and phone number follows]. And don't worry about the real calamity. No one would ever bomb Faywood — except maybe by accident.

[END DOCUMENT]

Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#16]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

Most Baha'is that I know of don't believe in "the calamity" as a physical consequence or don't believe that it is something they should be worried about. But those that do believe in such a future event as a physical reality (not as a symbolic reality) are more than a bit fundamentalist and dogmatic. This makes sense when you think about it. Since they are, participating in a literal understanding of the writings. Extending this propensity to all avenues of the Faith, its understandable why these same Baha'is would be very fundamentalist in their attitude and approach.

I've even been told by some such Baha'is that they refuse to invest for their future in the stock market because of this impending "calamity". Sheesh.

Talk of the calamity reminds me of the Christian fundamentalist (IOW literal) understanding of the rapture. If you are unfamiliar with this, basically it is the time when the world will end as we know it, those who are true Christians (I guess this means that you have been baptised by the right clergy, attended and tithed the right church, etc.) will physically ascend up into heaven to enjoy perpetual and permanent bliss. Meanwhile, those who remain will be the play things of the devil as he amuses himself by inventing new ways to torment these poor sinful individuals. If you want to take a gander at the lighter side of the rapture, here is a neat video.

It might be useful to remember that Shoghi Effendi started writing about the "calamity" in the 1930s. At that time doom and gloom were readily available (about the only thing being peddled in the markets). So it was rather easy to be swept up in the apocalyptic thinking of that time. Just as no one predicted the shockingly rapid decline from the heights of the roaring 20s, no one could have foreseen the phoenix like rise of the world from the ashes of the depression and World War II. At each turn there were "experts" who were vying to come up with more and more negative views of the present and the future. So you see, I don't fault the Guardian. After all, he was just a human being seeing the same things, feeling the same powerful emotions and reading the same "experts" in the then media (newspapers).

If you believe some pilgrim notes Shoghi Effendi was even more pessimistic (than appears in the official quotes). In one pilgrim note, he basically said that there were Nazi u-boats (submarines) all along the American coast line, waiting to pounce and invade the US! I have not idea where he got this notion, or whether he actually said words to that effect. But if he did, it wouldn't surprise me knowning his attitude at the time.

And much later, in the early 1990′s or late 1980s (when the whole environmental movement was in full swing), I remember going to a talk given by Ruhhiyeh Khanum (Shoghi Effendi's wife and secretary) and hearing her refer to the calamity as perhaps an environmental catastrophe (rather than war, or economic depression, or some other event). We must admit that in each instance, those living at the time were swept up by the zietgeist and were not able to see any other possibility other than the one they were living at that time.

I think such apolyptical, chicken-little beliefs are downright silly. It all boils down to your perspective and how you decide to view life and the world. Since the time that Shoghi Effendi wrote: the "world outlook is steadily darkening" and went on to forecast an "apolyptical upheaval marking the lowest ebb in mankind's fast-declining fortunes.". . . some 50 odd years have passed.

In that time, mankind has done remarkable things. Looking back in history since that time we can see amazing achievements, wonderful triumphs and astounding milestones. I don't want to go into details but they are obvious to anyone who cares to stand back and scan recent history: the information revolution broght on by computers, the internet and the age of instant communication, the increase of life expectancy by 3 months every year, advancements in medical sciences which allow us to treat and often cure diseases, travelling to distant stars, agricultural advancements which allow us to feed everyone on earth, etc.

Humanity is doing very well thank you. And we will continue to do well. In history, each and every time a doomsayer came along, they were a laughing stock in a matter of decades (remember the Club of Rome and their oil prediction? remember much earlier than them, those who said we could not feed our increasing world population?) Each and every time humanity has gone on to astound naysayers by innovating, by creating, inventing and finding a way where none were thought of. We always have and we always will. It is embedded in us and its power flows from our soul. A divine fountain of positive energy to advance through time and space.

So, then, what is the calamity and have we seen it yet or is it yet to come? My personal feeling is that the calamity is not a physical event (earthquake, economic devastation, etc.) but rather something much more powerful and ethereal. Which makes it even more difficult to get a handle on. And have we seen it or is it yet to come? I dunno. Who really cares? In either case, it is not in our hands.

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]

[Ed. personal home address]
June, 1977 — Vol. II, No. 11

Dear Baha'i Friends:

Sooner or later — usually sooner — every new Baha'i hears about something called "the calamity." Although the versions vary depending on who is telling them, descriptions of theis cataclysmic event usually involve a presumption of atomic holocaust, perhaps accompanied by a series of natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods and the like. Calamity folklore seems to be lodged in the Baha'i community just below the surface, the topic of all manner of rumors and speculation, the sort of stuff that is wryly referred to as "Kitab-i-Hearsay."

Greg Wahlstrom of Maywood made an extensive survey of the Baha'i writings regarding the calamity and presented his findings at our study class of June 11. Here is a summary of his findings and the discussion that folllowed their presentation.

Baha'u'llah, while unequivocal about the coming of a calamity, is vague about specifics, writing "to disclose it now would not be meet or seemly." The full quotation, which Shoghi Effendi cites in The World Order of Baha'u'llah (p.33), reads: "The world is in travail and its agitation waxeth day by day. Its face is turned towards waywardness and unbelief. Such shall be its plight that to disclose it now would not be meet or seemly. Its perversity will long continue. And when the appointed hour is come, there shall suddenly appear that which shall cause the limbs of mankid to quake. Then and only then will the Divine Standard be unfurled and the Nightingale of Paradise warble its melody."

While references to a calamity crop up in the writings of Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha, Shoghi Effendi pulled these passages together as he started to review the situation. He began writing about the calamity in the early 1930s, including this excerpt from a letter dated November 28, 1931 (The World Order of Baha'u'llah , p. 46): "That nothing short of the fire of a severe ordeal, unparalleled in its intensity, can fuse present-day civilization, into the integral components of the world commonwealth of the future, is a truth which future events will increasingly demonstrate." And again, on that same page, he adds: "Nothing but a fiery ordeal, ot of which humanity will emerge, chastened and prepared, can succeed in implanting that sense of responsability which the leaders of a new-born age must arise to shoulder."

The Guardian uses the term “calamity” in a broad sense, citing the decline in influence of religious institutions, rising nationalism, economic [Ed. illegible word], political confusion, financial upheavals and racial animosity, all as elements of a mounting crisis aggravating the condition of man and rocking the foundation of human civilization.

As the 1930s progressed, and the rise of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany made it evident another European war was in the offing, Shoghi Effendi, observing the economic and political upheavals of that era, began to predict the coming conflict would play a major role in unifying mankind. In March, 1936, in a letter that closes out the text of The World Order of Baha’u’llah , there appears a section entitled — prophetically enough — “Divine Retribution.” In that section the Guardian poses the rhetorical question: “Must a series of profound convulsions stir and rock the human race ere Baha’u’llah can be enthroned in the hearts and consciences of the masses, ere His undisputed ascendancy is universally recognized, and the noble edifice of His World Order is reared and established?” He follows this up with a passage reading: “The long ages of infancy and childhood, through which the human race has to pass, have receded into the background. Humanity is now experiencing the commotions invariably associated with the most turbulent stage of its evolution, the stage of adolescence, when the impetuosity of youth and its vehemence reach their climax, and must gradually be superseded by the calmness, the wisdom, and the maturity that characterize the stage of manhood.” (both from The World Order of Baha’u’llah , p.202)

The culmination of the Guardian’s thinking about the calamity is summarized in The Promised Day is Come, written in March, 1941, when World War II was beginning to hit full stride and half of Europe lay under Nazi domination. He opened the book with the words: “A tempest, unprecedented in its violence, unpredictable in its course, catastrophic in its immediate effects, unimaginably glorious in its ultimate consequences, is at present sweeping the face of the earth. Its driving power is remorselessly gaining in range and momentum . . . smitten by the evidences of its resistless fury.” (The Promised Day is Come, p.1) Shoghi Effendi then introduces what will become a recurrent theme in his writings about the calamity: its dual nature. “The judgement of God . . . is both a retributory calamity and an act of holy and supreme discipline. It is at once a visitation from God and a cleansing process for all mankind. Its fires punish the perversity of the human race, and weld its component parts into one organic, indivisible, world-embracing community.” (ibid, p.2) The Baha’is of the world, he wrote, were witnessing firsthand

nothing less than the “death pangs” of an “effete and godless” order which had spurned Baha’u’llah and, at the same time, the “birth pangs” of a “divine and redemptive” order proclaimed by the Manifestation (ibid, p.16).

As World War II spread and intensified, involving every major nation of the world, Shoghi Effendi became increasingly convinced the global war was the calamity Baha’u’llah had prophesied, when He warned “The time for the destruction of the world and its people hath arrived.” “The promised day is come, the day when tormenting trials will have surged above your heads, beneath your feet, saying: “Taste ye what your hands have wrought!” “Soon shall the blasts of His chastisement beat upon you, and the dust of hell enshroud you.” (ibid, p.1) Lining up those grim prophecies with the course of events, the Guardian noted: “The internecine struggle, now engulfs the generality of mankind, is increasingly assuming in its range and ferocity, the proportions of the titanic upheaval as far back as seventy years ago by Baha’u’llah.” (Messages to America, p.45, May 25, 1941). In December, 1941, after the Pearl Harbor attack, Shoghi Effendi described World War II as “The most great convulsion in violence, planetary in range . . .” ((Messages to America, p. 53)

World War II ended without producing the results Shoghi Effendi hoped for and anticipated. Mankind did not unite. Universal peace was not established, the United States and the Soviet Union, one-time military partners, emerged from the war’s aftermath as political rivals and potential combatants, and the Guardian wrote in November, 1948, that the “world outlook is steadily darkening” and forecast an “apolyptical upheaval marking the lowest ebb in mankind’s fast-declining fortunes.” ((Citadel of Faith, p.58)

What has come to be the most widely known and most frequently cited of Shoghi Effendi’s writings on the calamity is his letter “American Baha’is in Time of World Peril.” composed in July, 1954. The letter describes a steadily deteriorating moral and social condition in the United States and includes a warning to the American Baha’is that unless the racism embedded in the nation is not uprooted, it will “cause the street of American cities to run with blood.” (ibid, p.126) And, in perhaps his grimmest and most terrifying language to date, he warned that unresolved racial hatred would worsen “the havoc which the fearful weapons of destruction, raining from the air, and amassed by a ruthless, a powerful and inveterate enemy, will wreak upon those same cities.” “The woes and tribulations which

threaten it (America) are partly avoidable, but mostly inevitable and God-sent. . .” he wrote. (ibid, p.126)

In April, 1957, a few months before his death, the Guardian returned to the topic of the calamity, summarizing its distinguishing characteristics as: “The violent derangement of the world’s equilibrium, the trembling that will seize the limbs of mankind; the radical transformation of human society; the rolling up of the present-day order; the fundamental changes affecting the structure of government; the weakening of the pillars of religion; the rise of dictatorships; the spread of tyranny; the fall of monarchies; the decline of ecclesiastical institutions; the increase of anarchy and chaos; the extension and consolidation of the Movement of the Left; the fanning into flame of the smouldering fire of racial strife; the development of infernal engines of war; the burning of cities; the contamination of the atmosphere of the earth — these stand out as the signs and portents” of a “retributive calamity” which must “sooner or later, afflict a society which, for the most part, and for over a century, has turned a deaf ear to the Voice of God’s Messenger in this day. . .” (Messages to the Baha’i World, p.103)

Our discussion of the above quotations produced some interesting comments, including the observation that some Baha’is cite Shoghi Effendi’s writings as justification for sitting tight and doing nothing. They believe the Guardian’s assertion that “nothing short of the fire of a severe ordeal, unparalleled in its intensity, can fuse and weld the discordant entities that constitute the elements of present-day civilization, into the integral components of the world commonwealth of the future, is a truth which future events will increasingly demonstrate” absolves the Baha’i community from much other than staying out of the line of fire.

But on closer examination, it becomes evident that such a view is mistaken. It is true — at least as far as Shoghi Effendi was concerned — that some sort of catablysmic event is required to provide the impetus for unifying mankind since, for the most part, it has ignored the message of Baha’u’llah. But the most such an event, no matter how far ranging and jolting its impact, can do is create a worldwide awareness of the need for unity, but only the Baha’i Faith can provide that unity. It is the work of the Baha’is to help spiritualize mankind.

There is also ample evidence that the notion of a single-event calamity — some universal “kaboom” and then everyone embraces the Faith — is wrong. Calamities, according to

Shoghi Effendi, have been with us for quite a while, usually in the forms of wars, civil disorders, political upheavals, economic fractures and a whole host of social dysfunctions which have plagued the planet for years. It is even arguable that the calamity began more than 100 years ago when the kings and religious leaders who were the direct recipients of letters from Baha'u'llah ignored the advice and warnings of those messages. Napolean III, to whom Baha'u'llah sent two letters, is the classic case in point. In the mid-19th century, he made France the most powerful nation in Europe and was considered one of hte most outstanding monarchs of the day. But Shoghi Effendi describes the emperor as "a dreamer, a conspirator, of shifting nature, hypocritical and reckless" (The Promised Day is Come, p. 50). Napolean III utterly ignored Baha'u'llah's first letter, reportedly scoffing "If this man is God, I am two gods!". Baha'u'llah sent another letter, writing, "For what thou hast done, thy kingdom shall be thrown into confusion, and thine empire shall pass from thine hands, as a punishment for that which thou hast wrought. Then wilt thou know how thou hast plainly erred." (The Promised Day is Come, p.29). The rest, as they say, is history. The French army, under direct command of Napolean III, suffered a disasterous defeat from the Prussians at the Battle of Sedan in 1870. The French empire collapsed and with it the monarchy. Napoleon was forced into lifelong exile and died a bitter, broken man. That may have been the first, but was not the last, calamity to occur as a result of ignoring Baha'u'llah. Calling World War II "the second stage in the global havoc which humanity, forgetful of its God and heedless of the clear warnings uttered by His appointment Messenger for this day, must, alas inevitably experience" (Citadel of Faith, p.125) Shoghi Effendi indicated clearly there is more to come.

Although there are no known details about the final calamity itself in terms of severity, duration and impact, there is a tantalizing clue about its timing provided by Abdu'l-Baha. Shoghi Effendi cites that clue in The Promised Day is Come on pages 125-126, quoting from a tablet of the Master that has come to be called the "Seven Candles of Unity." In that tablet, Abdu'l-Baha looks ahead to a growing sense of unity on earth during this, the 20th century, the "century of light." The Master compares this unity to candles, identifying them as politicical unity, unity of thought in world undertakings, unity in freedom, religious unity, the unity of nations, racial unity and agreement on an international auxiliary language. It is his fith candle — the unity of nations — which offers the most intriguing possibilities. Abdu'l-Baha writes: "The fifth candle is the unity of nations — a unity which in this century will be securely established. . ." Shoghi Effendi echoes that assurance in commenting on the tablet.

Nor is this the only place in which Abdu'l-Baha makes reference to the establishment of world unity by the year 2000. In a letter the Master wrote to the editor of The Christian Commonwealth in 1013, He said, "In the past century freedom was proclaimed, and the foundation of liberty was laid in all the western countries. . . Now in this radiant century in which the world of humanity is being matured it is assured that the Flag of Universal Peace shall become unfurled and shall wave over all regions of the globe." (Star of the West, Vol. V, No. 8, p.120)

What makes these passages noteworthy is the sequence of future events we know of in outline detail. We know, for example, that the calamity will precede what we Baha'is call the "Lesser Peace." We identify that as an interim peace which the leaders of the nations of the world will agree to following the calamity. This, in time, we are told, will be followed by the Most Great Peace. This peace will be brought about when the Baha'i Faith permeates the planet, spiritualizing its inhabitants. Abdu'l-Baha's remarks in the "Seven Candles of Unity" and in the letter to the editor of the Christian Commonwealth make it plain He believed the "Lesser Peace" which He called "the unity of nations" and the "Flag of Universal Peace" would be established "in this century." For that to happen, the calamity must occur sometime before the year 2000.

Our class discussion ended with a review of a recent (May 26) letter the National Spiritual Assembly sen to the American Baha'i Community on the topic of the calamity. The one-page letter fudged on the matter of timing, saying "It is true that Abdu'l-Baha anticipated that the Lesser Peace could be established within the twentieth century." (The italics are ours, but you can keep them.) It seemed to the class members that both Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi were more direct than the members of the National Spiritual Assembly were willing to credit. But whatever disagreement we might have with the National Spiritual Assmebly letter, it cites two important points that ought not be overlooked in this survey about the calamity. Quoting from a letter written by the Guardian's secretary to an individual believer in 1946, it says: "All we know is that the Lesser and Most Great Peace will come — their exact dates we do not know. The same is true as regards the possiblity of a future war; we cannot state dogmatically it will or will not take place — all we know is that mankind must suffer and be punished sufficiently to make it turn to God."

“The real calamity, it seems to us,” the Assembly members wrote, “would be for us Baha’is not to teach, not to act in accordance with the specific guidance we have been given to help mankind turn to God,” That was sentiment the class members echoed.

METAMORPHOSIS DEPT. Class members held a special meeting on June 18 to discuss reorganizing our sessions to make them more productive and meaningful. While most of our sessions have been worthwhile and insightful, a few have been unfocused and loose. Attendance and participation by class members has been spotty and we’ve neer resolved the basic conflict between being a kind of advanced study class and something more academic and serious. We thrashed out this issue at some length on the 18th. Tony Lee and Mehrdad Amanat spearheaded the reform movement. Mehrdad argued there is a need for new ideas in the Baha’i Faith, at least in this region, where the lack of intellectual stimulation locally makes a more formal, thoughtful class a necessity. Tony agreed, saying the Baha’i community is still basing its conepts on the intellectual groundwork of people like Horace Holley, who did their writing in the 1930s and 40s, when the Baha’i social principles were still revolutionary and progressive. Now, some of them are commonplace and most have lost their social appeal. HE said the class could help provide fresher stimulation to understand how the Faith relates to present-day society and its problems. Both argued that class participants present written reports on some aspect of the Baha’i Faith.

The main objection voiced by some people to all this emphasis on serious academics was the threat of an ego-gouging competition it posed. Those who present papers want to do so in an atmosphere of support and reinforcement, not as participants in some cerebral contest in which the unfortunate slob who makes a factual blunder or faulty conclusion becomes the object of redicule and public humiliation. The purpose of hte class is to discover truth, not amass points on some cosmic scale of standing. One way proposed to minimixe the risk of intellectual oneupmanship was to hold what might be called a “works in progress” session as part of the classes. During this period, class members at work on topics would reveal how their research is going and solicit comments and suggestions from other participants on how to proceed. It is hoped that, in this way, everyone will become more involved as a colleague, not a critic of the reports of others.

Those who argued for changing the class format said its basic purpose — to provide a forum for thoughtful topics and the free exchange of ideas on serious and difficult

problems confronting the Faith — would remain unaltered. They said by requiring the writing and presenting of papers, ideas will me more organized and conclusions clearer than is now the case. One other advantage of having written papers is that, once completed, they can be exchanged with other Baha'i study groups including those in Canada and England. eventually once having accumulated a backlog of papers, we might be able to have them published. After more discussion, there was a concensus to go ahead on a more academic leve, complete with written papers.

Near the end of the meeting, several class members volunteered to take on topics which gives us a supply for future classes. Mehrdad is doing research on the role of the Ulama in 19th century Iran and will present a paper on it for our next lass. (For openers, the Ulama controlled the taxicab franchise in downtown Tehran — if you think that's no big deal, just try getting a cab after Friday mosque services.) Joel Suffens signed up for the topic of Baha'i Faith and Civil Disobedience (or, How to Avoid Military Service, Unjust LAws and Other Unpleasantries Without Really Trying). Bob Ballenger has promised to regale class members with insights into the conflict between individual rights and the collective character of the Faith (being a short course primer on asserting your independance without risking your voting rights, or something like that). Tony Lee will delve into more background on the Baha'i community of Ishqabad (in which he finally squelches the rumour that their plans included creation of an adult amusement part with a thrill-a-minute rollercoaster ride called "Collapse of the Old World Order") Paula Wahlstrom will review — just as soon as she finishes reading — The Quest for Eden, offering her critical analysis of Elena Marsella's musings on such titilating topics as salvation, resurrention and the long-supressed transubstantiation (only recently legalized between consenting religions).

Other possible topics kicked around for consideration and, as of this writing, still open to anyone who want to sign up for them, were: The Concept of Holy in the Baha'i Faith, the Babi Conference at Badasht, the Concept of Infallibility in the Baha'i Faith, Shoghi Effendi: the contrast between public figure and private individual, the Baha'i Faith and its Relations with Other Religions, Contrasts between Western and Persian Apprioaches to the Faith. Book reviews on topics related to the Faith are also welcome as report material.

NEXT CLASS: will be at 2 pm, Sunday, July 10, at Mehrdad Amanat's apartment [Ed. personal address follows]. The topic will be Mehrdad's report on the Influence of the Ulama in 19th Century Iran.

PARTING SHOTS: A few recent arrivals have expressed interest in obtaining back copies of these bulletins (God only knows why). They are available, at 50 cents each, from our esteemed treasurer and featherbedder, Paula Wahlstrom [Ed. personal address follows]. Also, to avoid confusion and for the sake of a tad more formality, we've begun numbering these newsletters in the traditional volume and number sequence (this one is Vol. II, No. 11), retroactive to our first letter of November 9, 1976. We'd also like to remind you that these reports are available only on a subscription basis. The cost is $12 a year, which just about covers our photocopying and mailing expenses. We don't have a subscription service, which means you are responsible for making sure your own subscription does not expire. We may be disorganized, but at least we're sloppy. Those who do not pay up will be summarily dropped from our mailing list. This diktat does not apply to our overseas subscribers who will, no doubt, sigh with relief that they are not subject to such police-state treatment.

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Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#17]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

This newsletter gives a brief history of the Persian political scene just before the arrival of the Bab. The discussion brings up an interesting point; that the challenge the Bab presented to the then Iranian society was not simply a religious or doctrinal one. But rather, because of the Shi'ite belief of theocracy (that society was, rightfully, to be ruled by the Imams), the Bab's proclamation was a direct threat to the ulama's political and economic powerbase. This may be surprising to some but the fact is that it has historical basis. Early Babis would often enter a town and proclaim that, as of now, the contents of the town, the leadership and everything of consequence there now belonged to the Bab (due to His station). Its one thing to tell someone there is a new religion, its a whole different thing to tell them their

position of power, and wealth is no longer theirs. In my opinion 90% of the vehement opposition directed at the Babis probably came as a result of this, and not as a result of their proclamation of a new religious movement.

As well, you will find at the end of the newsletter, a summary of all previous class topics and discussions so far.

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

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[Ed. personal home address]
July, 1977 — Vol. II, No. 12

The picture we have of the 19th century Persia is an unhappy one. Historians agree it was a land sunk in barbarism, rotten with corruption and shot through with incompetency at all levels of society. In *"God Passes By,"* Shoghi Effendi characterizes the Persians of that era as "the most decadent race in the civilized world, grossly ignorant, savage, cruel (and) steeped in prejudice."

Political power in Persia in the early years of the 1800s evolved into a unique kind of church state where the shah shared power with a de facto clergy whose authority sometimes exceeded his own. This clerical power bloc, although not strictly speaking a priesthood class, was called the "ulama" (meaning "learned ones") and held powerful sway over Persian life. Its influence had a direct effect on the infact Babi movement.

Mehrdad Amanat presented a paper, "The Role of the Ulama in Nineteenth Century Persia," to our Baha'i study seminar on July 10. Here is a summary of his report. Persia was then, as it remains now, predominantly a Muslim nation, a country in which the Shi'ah [Ed. also spelled Shi'ite] theology is the doctrine of the Imamat. This tenet holds that only a succession of divine religious figures, the Imams, have legitimate right to power in a Muslim state. With the "disappearance" of the Twelfth Imam, Imam Muhammad, in 260 A.H. (circa 873 A.D.), in theory, no government was eligible to run the state. The doctrine of Imamat presented no particular political problem during the long Safavid Dynasty in

Persia. The line of Safavid shahs could lay claim to the right of rule because they were the direct descendants of the Imams.

But the Qajar Dynasty, which began in Iran with the reign of Fath Ali Shah (1791-1834), could make no such claim. An attempt to justify Qajar rule by citing the pre-Islamic concept of "divine monarchy" failed when challenged by the ulama. The power vacuum was filled when the ulamas, who claimed to be the legitimate intermediaries between the Imams and the Muslims, assumed a sharing role in the power of government.

Aside from exercising spiritual leadership over the Persian Muslim community, the quasi-governmental rights of the ulama enabled the clerical bloc to administer the nation's religious endowments, collect a religious tax and run a civil court system to resolve personal or commercial disputes. The state maintained control of the court system dealing with criminal cases.

Once in power, the ulama maintained control by raising up private armies composed of the tullab, the religious students who came to study under the ulama, and by allying themselves with organized bands of brigands called lutis. The most important and learned of the ulama were the mujtahids [Ed. also spelled mujahid]. They were the leaders of the religious power bloc. Some mujtahids supported themselves by living off the taxes and funds they collected, while others loaned out money, charging high interest rates despite a clear prohibition against usury in the Qur'an. This income, from whatever sources, made the mujtahids independantly wealthy and even more powerful.

The influence of the ulama reached its peak during the 19th century reign of Fath Ali Shah. The shah aligned himself with the ulama and, under his influence, the bloc grew in power. Regular sums of money were routinely doled out to the clerical group. Huge amounts were expended to build new mosques and embellish religious shrines. But, despite the extension of their power and influence, the ulama failed to take the opportunity to become a force in the leadership of the nation. "Their main concern was their own immediate interest. Their view of politics was shortsighted. They were woefully ignorant of international relations. In general, their intervention in the affairs of the state was consistently harmful to the national interest." Amanat writes.

Having gained power under the wing of the shah, the ulama evolved into an arch conservative force, resisting almost all reforms, including anything that smacked of a

secularizing influence. “They had no concern for the national interest, they did not help to resolve any of the social, political or economic problems facing Persia and acted as a reactionary force against those who attemped solutions to these problems.” Amanat notes.

The Babi movement is a good example of the ulama’s dogged resistence to any progressive idea or sentiment which threatened its power. When the Bab declared His mission, one of His claims was that He was the Qa’im, or the Hidden Imam. That claim, if honored, meant the end of the ulama rule, for the authority of the clerical bloc rested on the fact that they represented the Hidden Imama in His absence.

Amanat writes, “The Bab not only presented a doctrinal challenge to the ulama. He proposed a genuine and radical idology which would revolutionize Persian society. This doctrine used the stron religious foundations already established in the society. Such ideas were clearly in sharp disagreement with the interests of the corrupt and conservative members of the ulama and the state. The result was the murder of thousands of Babis and the Bab Himself.”

The political myopia of the ulama led its members to urge Persia into a series of wars with Russia — all against an army that had defeated Napoleon. Ther Persians suffered a run of humiliating reversals on the battlefield. The wars had disasterous consequences for the nation. Under the peace treaty of Turmanchay (1828), for example, Persia lost the entire province of Armenia to Czarist Russia. The entire Caucasus region, once entirely Persian, was taken by the victorious Russians as a result of the wars.

The ulama began to fall from power during the reign of Muhammad Shah (1835-1848). The shah favored the Sufis, an unorthodox, mystical sect of Islam, giving them money and making them influential at the expense of the ulama. As the ulama declined in power, antagonism between the clerical gropu and the state intensified. The mujtahids, who once vehemently denounced foreigners as infidels began to look to the European powers to bolster their sagging influence.

During the reign of Nasri’d-Din Shah (1848-1896), foreign domination of Persia reached its peak. England and Russia, rivals for influence in Iran, each played on the ulama, manipulating its membership in a struggle for political and commercial advantage. During the last half of the 19th century, as the Russians gained the upper hand in this battle for power, the British began to finance and stir up various anti-government movements. In the

early 1900s, in their political last gasp, the ulama joined a citizen coalition attempting to compel the new ruler, Muzaffari'd-Din Shah (1896-1907), to accept a constitutional form of govenment. Although the ulama took a leadershp role in the early days of this revolutionary movement, its members were soon supplanted by Persian intellectuals, whose ideas formed the heart of the constitutional drive. At that point, members of the ulama began to split into rival camps, some continuing their support of the constitutional movement, others stridently denouncing it. The power of the ulama, already in decline, fell to pieces.

Amanat's paper ends with a quote from Sadi [Ed. also Saadi], a famous Persian poet. In this freely translated verse, Sadi takes a sarcastic jibe at the pretense and false piety of those like the ulama, writing:

"The pious, who creation face,
Pray with backs towards Mecca's place."

UPCOMING CLASSES: Our next session wil take place on Saturday, July 30, at 2 pm at Tony Lee's apartment [Ed. personal home address follows]. Ruth Campbell, on load to us from the Phoenix, Ariz. community, will review the role and status of women as seen through the Baha'i writings.

AND THEN: Two classes have been set up for August. The first will take place on Sunday, August 14 at 2 pm in the home of Jon and Chris Hendershot [Ed. personal home address follows]. Bob Ballenger will present his muzzy, befuddled and probably seditious paper, laughingly titled: "Roles in Conflict: Baha'i Administration versus American Individualism." Then, on Saturday, August 27, at 2 pm, Connie Barne's long-awaited paper, "A Baha'i Theory of Personality" will be given in the home of Greg and Paula Wahlstrom, [Ed. personal home address and phone number follows].

FUTURE FROLICS: Topics in preparation include sessions on "Shoghi Effendi: the Contrast Between Public Utterance and Private Views," (that's sort of a working title) with Jon Hendershot; Paula Wahlstrom's review of Elena Marsella's book "The Quest for Eden;" Tony Lee's overview of the rise and fall of the Baha'i Faith in Russia; Greg Wahlstrom's review of a book on the social structure of Islam; Mehrdad Amanat's review of H.M. Balyuzi's book "E.G. Browne and the Baha'i Faith," and, next year sometime

(assuming he gets off his duff to do the research) Bob Ballanger's study on attacks on the Baha'i Faith in America.

LAST GASPS: We are in the process of purging our mailing list. Many people once said they wanted copies of these class notes, but their interest did not sustain them to the extent of paying the required fees for these summaries. We'll be mailing post cards to those who haven't paid up, sort of a last warning before their names are axed from out list. Photocopies of the full papers presented to our classes will be made available after each is presented to the class. For those of you who want more than these space-limited summaries you read here, copies of the papers are available at $1 each (all right, all right, don't everybody rush forward at once). Please send your money and your order to Paula Wahlstrom [Ed. personal home address follows]. Also available for those who crave such junky trivia, are back issues of this newsletter. These, too, cost $1 each and are available from Ms. Wahlstrom. Please specify which issue (by date) you want when ordering.

Here's a list of newsletters to date and a summary of their content:

Nov 9, '76 (Vol. I, No. 1) Introduction to the class and its groundrules.
Nov 16, '76 (Vol. I, No. 2) more organizational stuff and topics for discussion.
Dec 5, '76 (Vol. I, No. 3) class discussion of Denis MacEoin's "The Concept of Nation in Islam,"
Dec 11, '76 (Vol. I, No. 4) class discussion of apparent sexism in the Kitab-i-Aqdas.
Dec 21, '76 (Vol. I, No. 5) Susan Berkman's paper on "Myth and Ritual in the Baha'i Faith."
Jan 3, '77 (Vol. II, No. 1) Bob Ballenger's report on "The Covenant Breakers of Akka" and Denis MacEoin's rebuttal to class discussion of his paper on the concept of nation in Islam
Jan 14, '77 (Vol. II, No. 2) Joel Roth's review of two sociological studies (one by a Baha'i) on the influence of religion on human behavior.
Jan 26, '77 (Vol. II, No. 3) Jon Hendershot's report on St. Paul's pattern of composition and uses of symbols in the 15th chapter of I Corinthians
Feb 10, '77 (Vol. II, No. 4) Tony Lee on "Politics and the Baha'i Faith" (with supplementary material).
late Feb,'77 (Vol. II, No. 5) Tony Lee's report on birth control, contraception and abortion in the Baha'i Faith.
Mar 6, '77 (Vol. II, No. 6) Kazem Kazemzadeh, "The Baha'i Community of Ishqabad"

Mar 19, ’77 (Vol. II, No. 7) general class discussion and rebuttal to the Jan. ’77 editorial in “The American Baha’i” entitled “Gentlemen, the Verdict Please.”
Apr 11, ’77 (Vol. II, No. 8) Kazem Kazemzadeh on a modern day persecution of the Persian Baha’is – the Yazd incident of 1949
Apr 17, ’77 (Vol. II, No. 9) Amin Banani’s analysis fo the Baha’i writings authenticity systems proposed by Tony Lee and Denis MacEoin.
May 1, ’77 (Vol. II, No. 10) general class discussion and a deepening on Baha’u’llah’s pupose for the human race
June, ’77 (Vol. II, No. 11) Greg Wahlstrom’s review of the calamity as seen in the Baha’i writings

[END DOCUMENT]

Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#18]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

I just have three quick comments about this newsletter. First, the main topic is a fascinating one because it challenges the assumption that most Baha’is have about the nature of revelation in the Baha’i Faith. I dare say its something which most have not really thought about. But that isn’t to say that most will agree with the ideas presented below. I guess some Baha’is may argue that such mortal interference, intervention or participation isn’t necessarily proof of an external force acting on revelation; but that that itself was brought on by the Will of the Manifestation of God and in a sense was all part of the grand design. Whether you agree or disagree, it is a very interesting topic and one that doesn’t get to see much light of day.

The other comment I have is about the mention, in the newsletter, of LSA and NSA by-laws which were written by average, ordinary (American) Baha’is and approved by the

Guardian. So although there did not originate from the pen of Shoghi Effendi, they did become official and binding from 1927 and onwards. Most Baha'is don't know (is this a little known fact? hmmm…) that these by-laws were changed in a special resolution of the NSA of the US in 1994. And after this change, the by-law change applied to all LSAs and NSAs around the world. I'll leave it at that for now. In reality, this is an important topic as it has consequences which are far reaching for the Baha'i worldwide community. Hopefully, I'll find some time in the near future to write about it and explain further what I mean.

Finally, my last comment is about Greg Dahl's opinion that the calamity may be an economic collapse brought on by the protectionist stance of governments around the world (the restriction of trade). Maybe it is almost 30 years of hindsight which allows us to see the error of such an opinion, or maybe it is the fact that, as Dahl himself mentions, Baha'u'llah praised and encouraged free-trade. Dahl's opinion reflects what I mentioned in my commentary of the calamity; that it is easy to be cought up in the zietgeist of your time and lose perspective. We see that this has claimed another victim as the economic malaise of the 1970s affects his view and causes him to make such predictions (notice how he implies a comparison to the Depression). Today, we know that the world – unwittingly – heeded Baha'u'llah's wishes and we also see the economic wealth that it created as a result. Shoghi Effendi might disagree with me, but I think Baha'u'llah would feel right at home with the Austrians.

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]

July 30, 1977 — Vol. II, No. 13

[Ed. personal home address]
City Motto: "Nihil Movetur Et Curat Nemo."

To most Baha'is, the Abha revelation has taken the form of a monologue, from the Manifestation to the masses. In the popular conception, the Prophet's method was to reveal

the Will of God, while the body of believers was to listen and render, the the Baha'i phrase, "instant, exact and complete obedience."

That view of how Baha'i teachings came into being was challenged in our July 30 study class by Tony Lee. Lee argued the developement of Baha'i doctrine and the tenents of the Faith came as a result of a dialogue — indeed, a collaboration — between the central figures of our religion and individual believers. He said his study of the issue led him to conclude the development of the Baha'i Faith was never a one-way street in which edicts were handed down from on high to be unquestioningly obeyed. Rather, Lee asserted, individual Baha'is took an active role in developing the Cause an deven went so far as to introduce doctrine which subsequently became part and parce of Baha'i dogma. However active the believers were in helping formulate the Faith, anything htey did had to subsequently be ratified or approved by a central figure to be valid, he noted. That veto privilege, however, in no way intimidated Baha'is from taking initiative and introducing some of our most basic concepts and practices.

Lee's presentation was somewhat off-the-cuff, the result of being an eleventh-0hour substitution for Ruth Campbell's paper on the role of women in the Faith. Ms. Campbell was unable to complete her research in time for our class. Since Tony's presentation was a fill in, he had no time to compose a paper, but spoke from notes. Therefore, there is no formal report that our readers may send away for, so this summary will have to do. Lee cited examples of his collaborative revelation thesis in each of the major epochs of Baha'i history. Following that outline, here, in condensed form, is what he said:

BABI DISPENSATION: The most dramatic examples of interaction between central figure and believers take place in this era. A careful reading of Nabil's Narrative, *"The Dawnbreakers"*, makes it clear that the declaration of the Bab was a dialogue between the Bab and Mulla Husayn [Ed. also spelled Mullah Husayn]. Baha'is celebrate the Declaration of the Bab at about two hours and 11 minutes after sunset on the evening of May 23. However, Nabil makes it clear that the Bab declared Himself to Mulla Husayn before that exact time. Briefly, here is the story, Mulla Husayn, whose search of the Promised Qa'im has taken him to the city of Shiraz, is met just outside the city gate by the Bab. The Bab takes Mulla Husayn home with Him and, together, as the sun sets, they say their evening prayers. Afterwards, they begin conversing about Mulla Husayn's quest for the Promised One. The Bab asks Mulla Husayn how he will know who this is. The Mulla

then reels off a list of qualifications, including a sketchy physical description. At that point, the Bab, according to Nabil's Narrative, tells Mulla Husayn, "Behold, all these things are manifest in Me!" At that point, the Bab has formally declared Himself to be the Promised One Mulla Husayn is in search of. That is the Declaration of the Bab. That is not, however, the moment we Baha'is celebrate.

Mulla Husayn is surprised by this statement and refused, at first, to accept it. He asks the Bab to prove Himself, first by explaining some of the hidden, abstruse teachings of the Shaykhi sect, and second, by writing — unbidden — a commentary on the Surih of Joseph in the Qur'an.

The Bab complies with both requests and, it is important to note here, we have a dialogue in which Mulla Husayn, who is to become the first Babi, is directly affecting and shaping the Babi Revelation. Once the Bab has completed His commentary on the Surih of Joseph, it begins to dawn on Mulla Husayn that his quest is over, he has found the Qa'im. Stunned by the growing realization fot his knowledge, Mulla Husayn glances at the nearby clock and sees the time as two hours and 11 minutes past sunset. He rises to leave, but is restrained by the Bab, Who tells him, "If you leave in such a state, whoever sees you will assuredly say: 'This poor youth has lost his mind.'"

It is one of history's little ironies that the moment we Baha'is celebrate as the Declaration of the Bab is a time when the Bab has told Mulla Husayn, "Don't go outside, people will think you're nuts." But as amusing as this small quirk may be, it has some far-reaching implications. We do not, in fact, celebrate the actual Declaration of the Bab. That event occurred early in the evening. What we celebrate as the beginning of the Babi dispensation is the acceptance by Mulla Husayn of that declaration. In other words, a Babi, the first Babi, has played a direct and bital role in the revelation.

The single most striking example of the influence of believers on the course of religious revelation occurs at another point in the Babi dispensation. It is the conference of Badasht during which the Babis broke with their Islamic past and sent the Babi Movement on its own, separate course. Eighty-one Babis, including such prominent figures as Baha'u'llah, Quddus and Tahirih, met for 22 days in June and July 1848 and, acting on their own authority, abdogated the Shari'ah, the Muslim canonical law based on the Qur'an. They had absolutely no legitimate authority to do this. Yet that act, rightfully reserved for the Prophet, changed the entire course of religious history. It is also at this point that Tahirih

declared the principle fo the equality of men and women. The Bab, held prisoner in the fortress of Chihriq, did not learn of these developments until later, but did not repudiate them, allowing the acts of His disciples to stand. Tahirih's proclamation of the equality of men and women is of special interest in this regard. As far as we know, the Bab wrote little, if anything, about this concept. Even Baha'u'llah never made it a central point of His revelation, although perhaps this is because, by the time He declared His mission, the principle of sexual equality had become a fundamental part of Babi creed and He felt it unnevessary to affirm what was already accepted dogma.

BAHA'U'LLAH: The influence of the believers on the course of the revelation is almost as far reachign in the Baha'i Faith as it was in the Babi dispensation. Baha'u'llah revealed the *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, the Most Holy Book, at the direct request of the believers as is evidenced by this passage from page three of the Introduction to the *Synopsis and Codification of the Kitab-i-Aqdas*[Ed. at the time of this newsletter only the Synopsis was available]:

"'For a number of years,' Baha'u'llah states in one of His Tablets, 'petitions reached the Most Holy Presence from various lands, begging for the laws of God, but We held back the Pen ere the appointed time had come,'"

It is this same interaction, this same request for information that led Baha'u'llah to write the *Kitab-i-Iqan*, which Shoghi Effendi called "unequalled by any work in the entire range of Baha'i literature, except the *Kitab-i-Aqdas*." *The Iqan* was written for an uncle of the Bab who asked Baha'u'llah to explain progressive revelation to him.

Even after "the appointed time had come," Baha'is could still influence and coax more out of the Prophet. "Questions and Answers." an explanatory appendix to the Aqdas, is the result of questions a Persian Baha'i submitted to Baha'u'llah, hoping for an explanation of some passages in *the Aqdas*. Again, it is another example of a Baha'i playing a direct role in the revelation.

ABDU'L-BAHA: While there are many stories illustrating instances where Baha'is influenced 'Abdu'l-Baha (His journeys to Europe and America came at the request of early Western Baha'is), a couple of examples will suffice.

The idea of constructing a House of Worship in Wilmetter, Illinois, was not one Abdu'l-Baha suggested to the handful of American Baha'is. Rather, they heard about plans to erect

a Temple in Ishqabad and wrote to Abdu'l-Baha requesting permission to follow suit in the United States.

The book *Some Answered Questions*, which almost singlehandedly defines the Baha'i attitude to Christianity and its doctrines, came as the result of a series of interviews Abdu'l-Baha granted to Laura Clifford Barney. There are amusing stories about Mrs. Barney pestering the Master with questions, but the fact remains that had she not done so, we might not have material we possess.

SHOGHI EFFENDI: There is evidence to suggest that much of the form of the Baha'i administrative order developed out of a dialogue between Shoghi Effendi and Horace Holley. Holley would write to the Guardian with questions and the replies laid the basis for our administrative machinery.

In a more direct example of believer influence, the by-laws for local and national Spiritual Assemblies were not, as is sometimes assumed, written by Shoghi Effendi, but a cadre of American Baha'is who sent them off to Haifa for his approval. The Guardian did not change one word of those suggested by-laws and, in fact, insisted that all local and national Assemblies in the world adopt them in uniformity.

Examples of individual influence persist even to the present. The correspondence from the Universal House of Justice in its letters about the Guardianship came in response to a detailed and direct request of an American Baha'i.

Summing up, Lee said all this history serves to point out that Baha'is are expected – even encouraged – to take an active role in the development of the Faith. The notion that we sit waiting for some higher authority to take the initiative always has been erroneous.

This unorthodox view went down with hardly a murmur of protest from class members who appeared to accept it as reasonable and accurate. One class member noted, however, that the initiative for individual action was more likely to exist when there was a vacuum of leadership. The Bab's confinement in Mah-Ku and later Chihriq made Him unavailable to lead the infact Babi community. In that absence of leadership, various Babis, including Baha'u'llah, exercised authority. But once an authority figure, a Baha'u'llah, an Abdu'l-Baha or a Shoghi Effendi, was on the scene, individual Baha'is were not deciding doctrine.

CALAMITY FOLLOW-UP: Greg Dahl of Washington D.C. pointed out one direct reference to the calamity we missed in our recent study class on that topic. Shoghi Effendi summarized his views of the calamity in *Baha'i News*, No.283 (September, 1954). It adds some interesting thoughts to what appeared in our notes. Also, some of the most interesting reactions to that class came from people who wanted to know why Greg Wahlstrom, who taught the session, had not used any pilgrim's notes. Essentially, it was because Greg was presenting the on-the-record view. While interesting, pilgrim's notes are unofficial and there is no way to validate their accuracy. However, as part of his paper on the contrast between Shoghi Effendi's public statements and private views, Jon Hendershot plans to include pilgrim's notes summaries of the Guardian's thoughts on the calamity. Since pilgrim's notes of this nature are not readily available, anyone having such documents is asked to contact Jon by writing to him at [Ed. personal home address and phone number follows].

In a cassette recording played for our class, Greg Dahl, who is an economist, also touched on the possibility of a calamity stemming from an economic collapse. The Baha'i Faith supports two economic principles that run counter to current economic practice in the world. The first of these views is that there must be free trade, that is, the unhindered movement of goods from nation to nation. Unfortunately, this position stands opposed to prevailing economics practice in which many nations, in an effort to protect their home-grown industries, erect stiff import barriers on imported goods. This sort of protectionism courts retaliation from other nations miffed that their goods should be so slighted. Dahl reported that protectionism was on of the factors aggravating the worldwide depression of the 1930s. The world's economic health now depends on a high level fo trade, but the growing trend toward protectionism threatens global economic stability, Dahl warned. Relative to this, and equally threatened by the trend of events, is the Baha'i view of a world superstate in which a global currency will be established, linking national economies together as never before. Contrasting the trend of events to the Baha'i view, Dahl concluded his remarks by saying, "It's a very unstable prosperity we are enjoying now." For those interested in a fuller discussion of the Baha'i Faith and economics, read Dahl's article "Economics and the Baha'i Teachings: An Overview" in the Fall 1975 issue of *World Order* magazine.

WHAT'S NEXT: We have two classes set for August. The first of these will present Bob Ballenger's hysterical ravings on "Roles in Conflict: Baha'i Administration versus the

Individual." That laugh-loaded event will take place on Sunday, August 14, at 2 pm in the home of Jon and Chris Hendershot [Ed. personal home address and phone number follows]. If you can't find it on the map (rumors that Manhattan Beach does not exist have been greatly exaggerated; the city *is* there, it's just that few people care to admit it), call Jon and Chris for directions. Then, on Saturday, August 27, at 2 pm Bonnie Barnes' paper, "A Baha'i Theory of Personality," will be given in the home of Greg and Paula Wahlstrom [Ed. personal home address and phone number follows].

AND NOW, A WORD FROM OUR SPONSOR: Dues for newsletter recipients are $12 a year, payable to Paula Wahlstrom, our esteemed treasurer. If you haven't paid up, do it now. Mail your checks to her at [Ed. personal home address follows]. Back issues of this gozamba (that's Yoruba for "trashy newsletter") as well as photocopies of papers presented to the class also are available at a buck each from Mrs. Wahlstrom.

[END DOCUMENT]

Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#19]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

This newsletter delves into some pretty controversial topics. To me, what's interesting is not as much the controversy that surrounds the ideas that follow, as much as they were 'controversial' and being talked about back then. I guess I always thought that the recent tensions and developments in the Faith (of which 99% of Baha'is are wholly unaware of) were just that, recent. But in reality, these ideas and critiques have been around probably even before the advent of the LA study class group. But they were usually ignored, belittled and never dealt with appropriately. Perhaps that's why it has become such a fault line today within the worldwide Baha'i community. Maybe that's why you have people leaving the Faith, not joining and some raising some very loud, angry and frustrated voices. As I mentioned in a previous post, maybe its 'blowback'.

The only other comment I have is regarding a comment that a class member makes below defending the policy of pre-publication review. They say that "when most people see the word "Baha'i" in an article, they assume the story carries with it the sanction of the Faith and represents the Baha'i point of view." This oft cited defense of review is one of the weakest, if not *the* weakest I keep hearing. What normal sentient being would read an article and seeing the word 'Baha'i' think BOING!

> This has the sanction of the official governing body of the Baha'i Faith and represents the official Baha'i point of view!

When was the last time you read an article which contained the view of a Christian or a Muslim or a Jew or whatever and thought the same? Or did you perhaps, using sound judgement, recognize it as the personal and individual opinion or commentary of one human being? Gimme a break.

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]

[Ed. although the date and serial numbers don't appear, they are:
August 14, 1977 -- Vol. II, No. 14]
Where the entire town is on
the wrong side of the tracks.
Baha'i Administration is, in current practices, a dictatorship under which dissent is suppressed and individual Baha'is are cowed into silence. That controversial view was taken by Bob Ballenger in our study class and summarizes the theme of the paper he presented on *"Roles in Conflict: Baha'i Administration Versus the Individual."*
Here is what he argued:

The Baha'i Faith faces a confrontation between its group-oriented nature and the individual impulse of the human race. This conflict is particularly aggravated in the United States because its national heritage of and homage for the notion of individual sanctity. America takes the concept of individual independence seriously adn that idea occupies a hallowed shrine in the national mythology of the country. It is true, and has been well documented

that America is a land of conformists, despite all the prattling about the virtues of "rugged individualism." Personal eccentricity is neither treated lightly nor tolerated openly. But despite this contradiction, the ethic of the individual has made itslef felt. While the phrase "do your own thing" has faded from thh popular consciousness, its message remains in full force and effect. The central authority most Americans adhere to is themselves, following their own perceptions, acting on their own judgements.

Baha'u'llah took on this devotion to personal liberty, which He saw as a universal human characteristic when He wrote: *"Liberty causeth man to overstep the boudns of propriety, and to infringe on the dignity of his station. It debaseth him to the level of extreme depravity and wickedness. Regard men as a flock of sheep that need a shepherd for their protection. This, verily, is the truth, the certain truth."* That sort of talk, however shrewd and insightful, will not enhance the popularity of the Baha'i Faith in America, not even among the Baha'is. But it helps bring into focus a problem we face in dealing with the Faith as individuals. The Baha'i Faith is a group-oriented religion and one in which the individualistic urge is to be kept in check and suppressed.

This governing principle is confirmed by Abdu'l-Baha who writes: *"It is incumbent upon everyone not to take any step without consulting the Spiritual Assembly, and they must assuredly obey with heart and soul its bidding and be submissive unto it, that things may be properly ordered and well arranged. Otherwise, every person will act independently, after his own judgement, will follow his own desire, and do harm to the Cause."* The virtue in this approach is that it prevents the flowering of any "cult of personality". The domination of the Administrative Order by any strong-willed person cannot occur under the Baha'i principle fo collective leadership.

But for all the advantage gained by preventing the Faith from becoming the personal vehicle for some ruthless individual, there exists, on the other hand, a danger of dictatorship of the institution. Baha'i Assemblies, local and national, have enormous powers at their command. They enroll new declarants, determine Baha'i status, suspend the administrative rights of miscreants, supervise marriages, oversee divorces, enforce Baha'i laws, exercise full jurisdiction over all Baha'i activities including meetings and feasts, collect and disburse funds and review and approve all Baha'i literature.

This authority is wielded in an administrative structure that is not at all democratic in nature. The Baha'i Faith makes no provisions for initiative, referendum or recall, three

standard democratic tools. Additionally, there is no allowance for a free press, no guarantee of freedom from self-incrimination and no right to a trial by jury of one's peers – all fundamental American principles, all wholly lacking in Baha'i Administration.

While Baha'is as individuals are not totally stripped of rights, they are very much on the short end of privileges. Each has the right to teach the Faith in his own way in his own home. Each has the right to self-expression. Individual Baha'is also have the right to criticize Assembly actions and ask for reconsideration if not repeal of some decision. And each Baha'i has the right to interpret Baha'i Scriptures in his own way as long as he does not attempt to set up his own views as official dogma.

What this imbalance of rights has led to – however unofficial and unintended – is a situation where there now exists a sometimes subtle but ever-present atmosphere of the suppression of dissent. Individualism, partly by design, partly by practice, has been muted to the point that, whenever it manifests itself, a personal outburst is viewed as an almost shocking breach of conduct – if not borderline treasonous behavior. People who exercise individual initiative in the Baha'i Faith are suspect and their efforts are usually squelched. The result is that the body of believers perceive a lack of any sense of co-partnership with their insititutions and many, confronted with a reality of an Assembly ignorant of and uncaring about their views, simply lapse into inactivity and have little, if anything, to do with their Baha'i community.

The imbalance of rights between Assemblies and individuals creates special problems in relationships between them. Shoghi Effendi was aware of this, and of the need to bring these potentially antagonistic elements together, when he wrote: *"Let us also bear in mind that the keynote to the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority, but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of a frank and loving consultation. Nothing short of the spirit of a true Baha'i can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilence, discretion and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candor and courage on the other."*

[Ed. unfortunately, it seems that the third page is missing...so here's the fourth page:]

[...]spiritual in nature. The system assumes their corruption and makes provisions for it, he said. So, for example, we have the concepts of a "balance of powers" and "checks and

balances" between the executive, legislative and judicial branches of American government. Since corruptibility is assumed, things have been arranged to minimize the damage of corruption. The system is inefficient, but that is the price that is paid for keeping it relatively uncorrupt and operating. In the Baha'i Faith, on the other hand, Lee said, the basic spiritual nature of man is assumed, and the administrative system arranged accordingly. But, for the Baha'i system to work properly, those in power must operate on a high level of spiritual awareness, creating an atmosphere of cooperation and fellowship with the body of the believers. Without that awareness, the Baha'i system will break down and the community suffers the consequences.

This view led some class members to suggest that Local Assemblies ought to be approached wih the relevant writings of Shoghi Effendi and Abdu'l-Baha in an effort to persuade those bodies to take the believers into their confidence and explain what they are doing and why. While everyone agreed that would be a good idea, there were some warnings voiced that Baha'is who approach their assemblies in this fashion ought to prepare to be rebuffed or have their suggesion accepted and eventually forgotten.

Tony Lee noted that individual Baha'i responsability does not extend to making sure Local Assemblies are functioning properly. Baha'is, as individuals, may be doing everything right, but sill would be unable to make a difference if their institutions is not performing properly. Class members were unable to agree on the best way of making sure their Assemblies are creating an atmosphere of fellowship, shared responsability and candor with the believers.

One other topic sparked considerable – although unresolved – discussion was the whole issue of administrative control over the writing of Baha'is, which some see as thinly disguised censorship. Shoghi Effendi wrote that the *"present restrictions imposed on the publicaton of Baha'i literature will be definitely abolished."* That was in 1929, but no end for such restrictions is yet in sight. Currently, the Administrative Order has and uses total control over what Baha'is write about their religion. There is no free press.

That power of review was defended by some class members. Gene Hendershot, on vacation from his pioneering post in the Central African Empire [Ed. now known as the Central African Repulic] pointed out that when most people see the word "Baha'i" in an article, they assume the story carries with it the sanction of the Faith and represents the Baha'i point of view. Beyond this, he said, Baha'is have ideas about the Faith that are

wrong and these need to be caught and corrected before they are disseminated to the public where they become accepted as valid.

But other class members argued this power of review too often is used as a form of subtle censorship to block publication books that are innovative or unusual. One example cited was the adamant refusal of the American Publishing Trust a couple of years back to distribute Hand of the Cause Bill Sears' book *Thief in the Night*. Some said this kind of censorship extends beyond just Baha'i books, with Baha'is being told they may not read books by enemies of the Cause nor by Covenant-Breakers. This is simply not true. Baha'is are not forbidden to read such books, although the Community as a whole is discouraged from doing so.

Another touchy topic arose, with some class members arguing that Baha'i scholarship has stagnated since the 1930′s and 1940′s and others claiming that the Writings of the Central Figures of our Faith are what we Baha'is should concentrate our energies on. These books alone provide the wherewithal for keeping ourselves on a spiritually even keel and are the wellsprings of progress and development for mankind. Others said the Baha'i Writings alone are not enough, nor is the desire to relax the current restraints an effort to replace those works. We need Baha'i scholars to relate the basic principles of the Faith to current social problems. Baha'i scholarship is essentially to help explain the Writings – which too few Baha'is read anyhow since the prevailing atmosphere is one in which the Baha'i books are to be revered, but not necessarily read.

We also took time in our class to review our last topic. Tony Lee's presentation on the collaborative nature of the Baha'i Revelation. Lee recapitulated his theory that Baha'i dogma often was formed in a dialogue between the Central Figures of the Faith and various believers at various times. (For details of how this works, see our July 30, 1977, newsletter, Vol. II, No.13.) There was at least one objection to his "dialogue" concept. That, Sheila Banani said, implies an exchange between equals. Individual Baha'is asking Abdu'l-Baha or Baha'u'llah questions about the nature of the Faith is not a dialogue to shape the revelation, she added. Lee responded that unequal partners can participate in a dialogue, even though conversations between a Prophet and His followers is not a dialogue between equals. His central point, that the Baha'is, from the earliest days until faily recently, have themselves introduced concepts which the authority figure has accepted as part of the religion, seemed to be well accepted by class members, with no major upheavals.

BARE CUPBOARD DEPT: Okay, gang, once again we find ourselves faced with a situation that has bedeviled us since our early days. Too few class members are volunteering to take on topics and prepare papers for presentation. Although several people have promised to churn out something for us, we face an untimely end to papers ready for discussion. Those of you who are working on papers, please agree to accept an early deadline on them. Those of you who have not chosen topics, please do so and prepare your papers. The class won't work if you don't.

NEXT CLASS: "A Baha'i Theory of Personality." Bonnie Barne' long-awaited paper, will be presented on Saturday, Sept 24, (not August 27, as originally slated) at 2 pm in the home of Greg and Paula Wahlstrom [Ed. personal address and phone number follows]. And, while we're on the subject of Maywood, let us note that is where Paula, our treasurer, lives. If you have yet to pay the annual dues to remain on our mailing list, please do so now. Past copies of papers presented to our class as well as back issues of the class notes are available from Paula for $1 each (that's cheap, gang). When ordering, please do so by title of paper or volume and number of the summary you want.

ENDGAME DEPT: We've received a steady stream of
demands for an English translation of the Hermosa Beach city motto, "Nihil Movetur Et Curat Nemo," that appeared atop our last newsletter. One person telephoned long distance from the Most Gorious, Heroic, Exalted and Fun People's Republic of Drindle to say he had taken the entire nation hostage and would nto release it until the translation was printed. Okay, so here goes. "Nihil Movetur Et Curat Nemo" is Latin for "Nothing Works and Nobody Cares." That is a state of affairs too apparent for comment among those who live in Hermosa.

[Ed. the following is attached to this newsletter but there is no indication that it is related to it - by topic - or page number. I've decided to include it anyway.]

Extract from a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer on 22 August 1977:

"The Universal House of Justice received your letter of 26 June seeking clarification on the infallibility of the Guardian and of the Universal House of Justice. We have been asked to convey the following to you.

"As the three questions you have raised are interrelated, it will be conducive to a clearer understanding of the issues involved if these questions are considered together.

"Shoghi Effendi was asked several times during his ministry to define the sphere of his operation and his infallibility. The replies he gave and which were written on his behalf are most illuminating. He explains that he is not an infallible authority on subjects such as economics and science, nor does he go into technical matters since his infallibility is confined to *'matters which are related strictly to the Cause.'* He further points out that *'he is not, like the Prophet, omniscient at will'*, that his *'infallibility covers interpretation of the revealed word and its application'*, and that he is also *'infallible in the protection of the Faith'*. Furthermore, in one of the letters, the following guideline is set forth:

'...It is not for the individual believers to limit the sphere of the Guardian's authority, or to judge when they have to obey the Guardian and when they are free to reject his judgement. Such an attitude would evidently lead to confusion and to schism. The Guardian being the appointed interpreter of the Teachings, it is his responsability to state what matters which, affecting the interests of the Faith, demand on the part of the believers complete and unqualified obedience to his instructions.'

"It must always be remembered that authoritative interpretation of the Teachings, was after Abdu'l-Baha, the exclusive right of the Guardian, and fell within the *'sacred and prescribed domain'* of the Guardianship, and therefore the Universal House of Justice cannot and will not infringe upon that domain. The exclusive sphere of the Universal House of Justice is to *'pronounce upon and deliver the final judgement on such laws and ordinances as Baha'u'llah has not expressly revealed.'* Apart from this fundamental difference in the functions of the twin pillars of the Order of Baha'u'llah, insofar as the other duties of the Head of the Faith are concerned, the Universal House of Justice shares with the Guardian the responsability for the application of the revealed word, the protection of the Faith, as well as the duty 'to insure the continuity of that divinely-appointed authority which flows from the Source of our Faith, to safeguard the unity of its followers, and to maintain the integrity and flexibility of its Teachings.' However, the Universal House of Justice is not omniscient; like the Guardian, it wants to be provided with facts when called upon to render a decision, and like him it may well change its decision when new facts emerge."

[END DOCUMENT]

Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#2]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

In the second newsletter the group discusses an interesting mystery within the Baha'i community: where are all the Writings, documents, Tablets, cablegrams, letter and other texts? The most glaring absence from this list, are the Writings of the Bab, Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha; most of which have yet to be translated or even made available. I've already touched on this point in my introduction but it bears repeating since it is such a pivotal issue.

As it is mentioned in the newsletter, most Baha'is are aware (even proud), there has been a tremendous outpouring of Revelation in the Babi and Baha'i Faiths. Unfortunately, most of these documents are yet to be translated and the originals are locked up and kept away from the masses. Only a trickle is released every now and again as the slow translation work proceeds at the Baha'i World Centre (Gems of Divine Mystery and The Summons of the Lord of Hosts are two recent additions). Along with the Writings of the Twin Figures of the Faith, innumerous amounts of ancillary correspondence, Tablets and historical documents are also inaccessible. The most famous of these is probably the Afnan Library, administered by the NSA of UK, which holds scintillating bits and pieces of the early history of the Faith.

As well, the bulk of the communications from the Guardian to the NSA of US and Canada (at the time led by Horace Holley) is 'missing'. One scholar's hypothesis is that those particular cablegrams of the Guardian to the US are not released because generally the instructions they contained were ignored back then. Controversial, but interesting nonetheless.

It is important to note that although ‘authoritative’ translations of the Texts are rather slow in coming out, there is nothing wrong with using and studying provisional translations – as long as they are designated as such. In fact, many provisional translations are widely available. These are translations done by Baha’i or non-Baha’i scholars which do not have the weight of the approval of the House of Justice. But they can, nevertheless, be just as good. It is these provisional translations which should be encouraged by the wide dissemination of the contents of the Baha’i library and archives. If you are interested in learning more about provisional translations, you can google “Juan Cole”, check this out, or go here.

Finally, there is an anecdote shared by a non-Baha’i scholar (you can find it in “The Baha’i Faith and Islam” , p.25-55) where he describes the difficulty he had in accessing documents dealing with early Babi and Baha’i history. He recounts that at each stage, he would have to interview with a “gatekeeper” at the World Baha’i Centre and prove to them that he knew more than they did! Only then would he be passed on to the next level – to be then submitted to the same grilling by this next person. I confess to finding this archaic process rather strange for a Faith which has as one of its principles the individual investigation of truth and universal education. With the marvel of today’s technology, I can’t understand why the UHJ just doesn’t make all our texts (officially translated or not) available to scholars. I do console myself, however, that this particular scholar did not succumb to frustration and in the end was given the access he sought.

Before proceeding you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]
[Ed. home address]
November 16, 1976
Dear Baha’i Friends,

The second meetings of the new class which we began two weeks ago was held on November 13th [Ed. date erroneously appears as 30th in text]. Only five people attended, however. All were disappointed that, because of illness and work-schedule conflicts, so many others were unable to attend.

[Ed. corrections are made for previously mentioned home addresses and phone numbers for Mehrdad Amanat and Joel Suffens]

(In addition to those listed last time, this letter is being sent to the following Baha'is:

Payam and Navid Afsharian [Ed. home address and phone number follow for each]
Gerry Ludwin
Farsheed and Mona Nourani

Unfortunately, Shahin Carrigan was ill and could not be present to make her presentation on the question of "value-free" science and its relationship to the Baha'i Faith. So, this subject was postponed until a later date (perhaps at the next session). The group decided simply to hold an informal discussion.

Soheil Sohrab lead the group by raising two points of personal concern to him. First, he explained that a non-Baha'i once complained to him that Baha'is commonly [Ed. illegible word, best estimate:] talk of the "100 volumes" which Baha'u'llah supposedly wrote. However, only a very few works of Baha'u'llah are available in English and most Baha'i literature tends to cite the same few quotations from Baha'u'llah over and over again. There may be many Baha'i books on the shelf, but their content is very repetitious — even Baha'u'llah Himself often uses quotations from His earlier Writings in later works. Soheil wondered how best to answer this question.

Everyone contributed to the discussion that followed and all comments cannot be summarized here. However, one of those present suggested that all the talk about the "100 volumes" may just be a smug way for some Baha'is to excuse themselves from studying the Writings for themselves. (i.e. "All knowledge is in the books anyway so I don't have to know anything myself.") Does the Manifestation of God come to reveal all knowledge and answer all questions? Of course not. And what is a "volume" supposed to be, anyway?

Someone noted that the primary emphasis which some Baha'is place on the volume and even the content of the Revelation is misplaced. The Manifestation does not come from God to deliver a set of books. (for instance, Jesus wrote nothing down and all of his recorded words would only fill ten or twenty pages of print.) The Prophets, it was argued, come primarily to affect a transformation in human society through the power of their own Person. Baha'u'llah has indicated that His Writings are only a tertiary proof of His Mission:

> "Say: the first and foremost testimony establishing His truth is His own Self. Next to this testimony is His Revelation. For whoso faileth to recognize either the one or the other, He hath established the words He hath revealed as proof of His reality and truth. This is, verily, an evidence of His tender mercy unto men."
> Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah p. 105

Soheil next raised the problem of explanations of progressive revelation which are usually heard at firesides. He was especially annoyed by the facile statement that Moses brought the harsh rule of Law, then Jesus brought Love, and now Baha'u'llah brings Justice. All agreed that an appalling amount of misinformation is continually being distributed at firesides. One person observed that false information about progressive revelation can also be found in some English pamphlets which are still distributed by the Baha'i Publishing Trust. (For example, can Krishna really be considered the Founder of Hinduism? Is Sabeanism the earliest known religion, with an unknown Founder? Is there any good reason why only nine Manifestations are listed in pamphlets and diagrams which explain progressive revelation? The answers are all, "No!"

After briefly discussing a few other topics, we came to the question of what to schedule for next time. As before, here is where we ran into trouble. After a while the group agreed that we would discuss Denis MacEoin's article, "The Concept of the Nation in Islam", which just came out in summer 1976 issue of World Order magazine. Everyone should read this article and be prepared to discuss it next time. No, Shahin Carrigan, was not forgotten. We still hope to hear from her next time, too.

* * * * * * * * * * *

Another personal note: since we are having a lot of trouble settling on subject matter to study and discuss, I am going to take the liberty of proposing four subjects (with the accompanying assignments) for the group to vote on next time. The two subjects with the highest number of votes will be the topics for the following classes:

SUBJECT #1: Baha'i history — the Conference at Badasht (everyone would read Nabil's account in the Dawn Breakers)

SUBJECT #2: Attacks on the Faith — The Vacant Guardianship (All would read the letters of the House of Justice on this subject)

SUBJECT #3: The Baha'i Teachings — The Kitab-i-Aqdas (everyone would read atleast the introduction to the Synopsis and Codification)

SUBJECT #4: Guest speaker — I understand that Vahid Rafati has been doing some work on the concept of infallibility in the Faith. Perhaps he can be persuaded to address our goup.

NOTE: THE NEXT SEMINAR WILL BE HELD SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 27th AT 3pm AT THE HOME OF MEHRDAD AMANAT. [Ed. personal home phone number, home address and directions follow]

[END DOCUMENT]

Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#20]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

This newsletter has a general introduction to the Persian Baha'i community of Tehran, which at its time was the largest congregation of Baha'is. The community that is being described below is sadly not there anymore. As a result of the 1979 revolution, the Baha'is were literally scattered to the four winds. At least those who were lucky enough to get out. Those who stayed and are still there have endured great hardships. Only within the past few years have the Baha'is seen a slight thaw and been able to live in some semblance of tranquility. My heart goes out to them because they are living in perhaps the most corrupt, decadent and morally bankrupt society on the face of the earth.

I also wanted to make an observation about Persian Baha'i women. In the words of the Baha'i reporting below, they were not at the forefront of the feminism movement any more. In fact, from what I've personally seen, Persian women (those who are born in, grow up and live in Iran) are even more chauvinistic than the males. Perhaps it is due to living in such close proximity to Muslims and their male centered culture. Or perhaps it is

something else. But whenever I see it, I am truly baffled. I mean, I always expected to see such women fighting even harder for rights and equality but instead I see them perpetuating pretty much the same culture they were brought up in.

Also worth pointing out is the rather shrewd manner in which the Baha'is at that time skirted the intent of an Iranian law – which was to prevent them from publishing – and only respected the letter of that law. Doing so, as you can guess, allowed them to publish with total freedom.

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]
"World's First Tow-Away
Erogenous Zone."
November, 1977 – Study Class Report- Vol. II, No. 15

American Baha'is frequently regard Persian Baha'is with something amount to near awe. It is commonly assumed in the American Baha'i Community that Persian Baha'is are more "spiritually developed" than their American counterparts. Peggy Caton, a UCLA graduate student who recently spent three years in Iran working on her doctoral dissertation, reported to our study class on conditions in modern Iran and the character of the Baha'i community there. Here is a summary of what she said:

ORGANIZATION: In Tehran, there are an estimated 50,000 adult Baha'is, although the figures vary, and some reports put the number closer to 80,000. In terms of Baha'i administration, the city is divided into 11 districts, each with its own Baha'i Center. In district 4, where Ms. Caton lived, there were 13 separate Feasts. A central Feast committee drew up the same agenda for each Feast in the city, specifying the devotions to be read and even choosing topics for consultation. The listed topics for consultation could be supplemented with other issues at local Feasts.

Although infants were seldom brought to the Feast, children age 5 and younger did attend and invariably remained quiet, sometimes perching as long as two hours on chairs without showing signs of restlessness. "Food is very important over there," Ms. Caton reported,

reeling off a list of seeds, fruits, candies and other delicacies that invariably formed a part of Feast. “At Feast, it was always a contest to see who would have the best refreshments,” she recalled, saying heaping platters of food of all kinds were commonplace until one of the Feast committees cracked down, ending a practice of one-upsmanship among those hosting the Feasts.

Iran remains an overwhelmingly Muslim nation and the influence of Islam can be seen in the Persian Baha’i Community. For example, on Baha’i Holy Days such as the Martyrdom of the Bab or the Ascencion of Baha’u’llah, many Baha’is will not play music during the day – a holdover from Islamic culture which considers music taboo on such solemn occasions. Often Baha’i women, again following Islamic custom, wear only black garments during the observances.

There is a wide variety of Baha’i cultural and social activities offered in the Tehran community. Special meetings for all ages and interest groups are common, especially on Thursday nights, (Thursday night in Iran is the equivalent of Saturday night in America. In Islamic nations, Friday is the sabbath day, as Sunday is in Christian culture.) Often, meetings are held to hear reports from travel teachers to the nation’s provincial areas.

Baha’i childhood education is stressed in the Tehran community. Baha’i children, beginning at age 6, are regularly enrolled in a “Lessons in Character” couse which parallels their regular schooling and proceeds, grade by grade, until the children are 18. This special schooling emphasizes rote study of the Baha’i scriptures.

One other area of intense activity is in the realm of archival material. Ms. Caton reported that the archives of the Tehran Baha’i Community include many of the Writings of the Bab and Baha’u’llah which have yet to be collated, translated or made available to the community at large.

The dedication lavished on securing archival material and historic objects was illustrated by one story Ms. Caton told. It happened that one of the swords of Mulla Husayn (which is now on display in the International Archives Building in Haifa, Israel) formerly was owned by a family of rich and powerful Muslims. Every year, during an Islamic observance of the Martyrdom of the Imam Husayn, the sword was carried on a pillow in the procession, as visible proof of the triumph of Islam over Baha’i.

The Baha'is were determined to obtain possession of the sword because of its significance to the early history of the Babi Faith. As it happened with the passage of time, members of the family that owned the sword began dying off one by one. A certain Baha'i was assigned the task of authenticating the weapon and somehow obtaining it. He became friendly with the owner of the sword and, after years of effort, was permitted to examine the blade. After verifying that it did belong to Mulla Husayn, he began a series of long, complex negotiations with the owner. In the end, the Baha'is got the sword, but only after years of intense, personal effort.

PERSECUTIONS: The general status of the Baha'i Faith in Iran has improved since the last century, when the heads of Babis were sometimes exchanged as gifts. Even so, "any Baha'i who goes into the provinces has got his life on the line," Ms. Caton said. There has been a recent revival of persecutions in Iran which corresponds to an increase in Baha'i activities in the provincial areas. For example, earlier this year, Ruhu'llah Taymuri-Muqudam, 37, a Baha'i pioneer who spent 20 years in Fazil Abad, a remote village, was stabbed and hacked to death by an assassin hired by Muslim fanatics in the area. His sister and mother were seriously injured in the assault.

The Baha'i Community also faces what it perceives as another persistent danger – the secret penetration into the ranks of the believers by members of a fanatical Islamic group known as the Muslim Brotherhood. Members of this group like to enroll in the Faith or worm their way into firesides and disrupt the proceedings with hostile questions. Another favorite trick of Brotherhood members is to discover the location of firesides, stake them out and, after the meetings end, threaten any non-Baha'is who have attended the gatherings. Baha'is who drive to Feasts and other celebrations at well-known Baha'i Centers are careful to park their cars a few blocks away. It is common for the tires of cars parked outside or near Baha'i Centers to be slashed. The harassment by the Muslim Brotherhood has led the Baha'is to take elaborate enrollment precautions to prevent outbursts and disruptions.

Enemies of the Faith often spread the rumor that Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi is influenced by the Baha'is – if he is not a Baha'i himself. In general, the Baha'is have a reputation for supporting the Shah and his government. The revolutionary underground, which occasionally unleashes terrorist attacks in the capital, considers the Baha'is to be

“shah lovers” and hardcore reactionaries who would be fair game for persecution in a revolutionary takeover of the government.

But despite being the object of contempt from the Muslims and splinter group revolutionaries, rumors that Baha’is live a prevarious existence surrounded by hatred are exaggerated, Ms. Caton reported. She noted that successful teaching trips are routinely undertaken to reach the country’s ethnic minorities, the Kurds, Turkemens, Lors, and those who live in Iran’s semi-isolated mountain regions. These groups have not been infected by the virus of anti-Baha’i propaganda and are quite receptive to the message of Baha’u’llah, she said.

There is also an active Baha’i publishing trust in Tehran which operates in relative safety, due to a quirk in Irani law. The Baha’i Faith is forbidden to publish materials, but publication is legally defined as “typesetting.” However, throught the use of offset and mimeograph techniques, this provision is circumvented and Baha’i material can be distributed.

SOCIAL MORES: Baha’is no longer represent the progressive element in the feminist movement in Iran. Baha’i women’s classes stress a home-and-motherhood role for females, usually offering topics which relating to cooking or child raising. Iran also suffers from a class stratification problem and this lack of communication and interaction among the upper, middle and lower classes is reflected, to some extent, in the Baha’i community. Wealthier Baha’is tend to be more influenced by European or American customs. Sometimes thsi influence produces a climate in which the richer Baha’is have little or nothing to do with their poorer co-religionists. The Western trend to secularization has resulted in the children from all classes of Baha’i families, especially the wealthy, often drifting away from the Faith.

NEXT CLASS: The next study class will be held on Sunday, November 27, at 2 pm at the home of Anthony Lee [Ed. personal home address and phone number follows]. Mr. Vahid Rafati will be speaking on “The Tablets of Abdu’l-Baha in the American National Archives.” Mr. Rafati has read over 1,600 tablets of Abdu’l-Baha in the original Persian and Arabic during work in the American archives. He will summarize his findings in this class. We may also be able to convince him to give another class on the concept of infallibility in the Baha’i Faith. He has written a paper in Persian on this subject for publication.

THIRD ANNUAL MEETING OF CANADIAN ASSOCIATION: The third annual meeting of the Canadian Association for Studies on the Baha'i Faith will be held in Surrey, BC. The meeting, held at Rosemary Heights, 3690 152nd St. (near the Vancouver Airport), begins Friday afternoon December 30, and continues through Sunday afternoon January 1, 1978. The program will include submitted papers, invited presentation, and art show "The Spiritual Quest of the Artist." For more information on the program write the Canadian Association for Studies on the Baha'i Faith, c/o the Baha'i National Centre, 7200 Leslie Street, Thornhill, Ontario, L3T 2A1. A registration form appears below and can be mailed with $5.00 registration fee to Jame Goldstone [Ed. personal home address follows].

AGE OF MIRACLES DEPT.: The survival of the LSA of Hermosa Beach, California, is assured. Recovering from a bleak low of five adults at the end of summer, we're now up to 10 adults and a few youth as well. For those among you who might have said prayers for us, we offer our gratitude. For those of you who surveyed the dismal situation and predicted, "You'll never get this community off the ground." we have this message: "Nyaah! Nyaah! Nyaah!"

[Ed. registration form follows]

[END DOCUMENT]

Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#21]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

This newsletter offers a glimpse into the unpublished and inaccessible archives of the writings of Abdu'l-Baha. Presenting this glimpse is a young Vahid Rafati who would later on become the director of research at the Baha'i World Center. This is a rather privileged and enviably position as, unlike most other scholars, it allows him access to source materials.

Also in this newsletter we see the first signs of a negative reaction to the LA classes. In this instance, a person reacted in an obviously emotional state to the statement that Baha'is are not forbidden from reading Covenant-Breaker material. I say emotional because clearly she did not take the time to think about the matter in a level headed way. If she had, she would have realized that the very quotes she supplied supported the statement she was so vehemently opposed to. This is not surprising when you consider that the average Baha'i has a visceral repulsion when it comes to covenant-breakers and enters into a somewhat irrational state when talking about them. I myself have run into this several times where angry Baha'is frothing at the mouth, quote things left and right without once taking the time to digest what they are saying.

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]
"The City That Features Close
Encounters of the Worst Kind."
CLASS NOTES – November 27, 1977 — Vol. II, No. 16

Our study class meeting was held on November 27, the eve of the anniversary of the Ascension of Abdu'l-Baha, a fitting time for Vahid Rafati of Santa Monica to discuss letters from Abdu'l-Baha which are on file at the National Archives in Wilmette, Illinois. Vahid spent the summers of 1975-76 pouring over the tablets, cataloging and classifying them. He reported that the National Assembly has more than 2,000 tablets from Abdu'l-Baha in its archives, some 1,400 of which he read personally.

Vahid noted that Abdu'l-Baha began writing when He was still in His mid-teens, at one point setting out a treatise on the authority of the Prophet Muhammad. During the course of His life, Abdu'l-Baha wrote books on history, philosophy, religion and a whole host of general subjects. Most of these works are unkown in the West.

From a Baha'i point of view, among His most interesting writings were the estimated 8,000 tablets or letters He wrote to individuals, Assemblies, Baha'i conventions, scholars, government officials, scientists and groups with ideals akin to the Faith. These notes varied in length from three to four lines to a thousand verses.

Vahid, who studied many of the tablets addressed to westerners reported “it is very difficult to see a formulated, and crystalized ideology in Abdu’l-Baha’s writings.” Nothing about His life is clear to us, and no attempt has been made to study His life and achievements.”

The tablets themselves were mostly written in Persian, although about 25% of them were composed in Arabic. Letters from Abdu’l-Baha began to appear in the West from about 1898 and continued (except during World War I, when Palestine was cut off from the West) through His death in 1921. Vahid said many of the tablets to early Western Baha’is were translated for them by Ali Kuli Khan or Dr. Zia Baghdadi, two Persian Baha’i pioneers living in the Chicago area.

Most of the tablets are quite short, ranging from five to fifteen lines in length, with a few running as long as 25 lines. Each tablet has His personal seal or signature on it. Abdu’l-Baha also signed those tablets to westerners in English script, writing His name: “abdu’l-Baha abbas.”

He also addressed the letters with a blessing to the recipient, sometimes beginning by writing, “be upon him Baha el-Abha” or using the honorific “Maidservant of God.” Abdu’l-Baha rarely initiated any correspondence, but usually wrote in reply to someone. Parenthetically, Vahid noted that one of the problems in classifying the tablets is that the letters to which they respond are not available, although, apparently, some are kept in Haifa but have not been collated nor sorted through. This presents an insoluable problem in some cases, for Abdu’l-Baha often replies to explain “the verse about which you asked” without noting what verse that was.

Despite the fragmented nature of the tablets, some stylistic similarities come through. Many of the tablets are written to encourage the fledgling American Baha’i community, and often the Master would compare the early Baha’is with the first Christians noting that Jesus’ first disciples also were few in number and humble in station. Abdu’l-Baha also frequently used naturalistic symbols in His writings, urging the American Baha’is to be “radiant like the sun” or unified “like the drops of one ocean.”

The main subject of His tablets were clarifications of the true teachings of Baha’u’llah, responses to personal inquiries about marriage and divorce problems and offerings of personal advice. (Writing to one lady who evidently informed Him she was divorcing her husband, Abdu’l-Baha repleid that He was distressed by this news and told her that her

spiritual love for her estranged husband must increase “until you are like brother and sister.”)

He also repeatedly stressed His confidence in the eventual triumph of the Faith in the West. While people would write to complain about the lack of progress of the Baha’i Faith in gaining widespread acceptance in early 20th century America, He would reply that, in time, the Faith would be embraced by multitudes. He noted that, while the early Baha’is were reviled and sometimes ostracized by hostile non-Baha’is, that also had been the case with early Christians.

Some of the Master’s tablets concerned California, which He said had the capacity to spread the teachings of God. He also offered lavish praise for Thornton Chase, the first American Baha’i, now buried in Inglewood, a suburb of Los Angeles. Abdu’l-Baha instructed the Baha’is of the Los Angeles area to heap bunches of flowers on Mr. Chase’s grace and recite prayers all day long on the anniversary of his death. Once, when a San Francisco Baha’i wrote about the fewness of the number of Baha’is in Los Angeles (San Francisco always was jealous of Los Angeles), Abdu’l-Baha replied that while the Los Angeles assembly was small, if its members were steadfast in their belief, they could march in the forefront of the Baha’i ranks. In response to another letter, He told an inquirer that it was not permitted to hand out Baha’i literature on the streets and in public places.

Vahid said that his reading of the tablets convinced him that Abdu’l-Baha was flexible in His thinking, but firm to the point of being rigid when it came to matters of loyalty to the Covenant. He also emphasized to the Baha’is to whom He wrote that they must reflect their religious beliefs in their lifestyles, avoiding the examples of Christians and Jews who professed one mode of behavior and practice another.

Abdu’l-Baha sometimes would compose prayers on request and, in a few instances, consented to interpret dreams of those who wrote to Him for such explanations. And, there were the usual requests for explanations of Baha’i social teachings, the importance of selecting a universal language. And, in response to other requests, the Master delved into philosophical topics, such as the goal of creation, the station of man, man’s relation to God and the like.

He also devoted some communication to dispelling misunderstandings about His own authority. To those people who addressed Him as a Prophet or even – a common

misconception in those early days – as the Return of Christ, He denied having prophetic powers or authority. He would then briefly explain that He was the Center of Baha'u'llah's Covenant and the authorized interpreter of His father's writings, but could not establish His own rules or create His own religion.

And, Abdu'l-Baha also offered explanations of verses in the *Kitab-i-Aqdas* or passages from *The Hidden Words*, urged Western Baha'is to learn Persian and to memorize selected Baha'i prayers.

He also identified several important Tablets of Baha'u'llah which He urged be translated into English and disseminated to non-Baha'is as representative samplings of what the Faith believes. These Tablets were later identified by Shoghi Effendi as supplementing and modifying the *Kitab-i-Aqdas*. They are the "Ishraqat" (Splendors), "Bisharat" (Glad Tidings), "Tarazat" (Ornaments), "Tajalliyat" (Effulgences), "Kalimat-i-Ferdawsiyyih" (Words of Paradise), "Lawh-i-Aqdas" (Most Holy Tablets), "Lawh-i-Dunya" (Tablet of the World), and "Lawh-i-Maqsud" (Tablet of Maqsud)[Ed. which means: 'Tablet of the Goal' or 'Desired One']. Two other important works in this regard are the "Kitab-i-Ahd" (Baha'u'llah's Covenant) and "Questions and Answers".

Vahid was reluctant to draw any conclusions from his research since he had not read the Tablets of Abdu'l-Baha in other archives. He said it is not clear why Abdu'l-Baha would take certain positions in what He wrote, nor is very much known about what outside influences in terms of cultural and intellectual contacts He had that might have shaped what He wrote. Some class members, however, argued that the 1,400 tablets which Vahid read was a broad enough sample to begin making some generalizations which could always later be amended if new facts came to light. They further argued that it is a mistake to believe that a complete reading of Abdu'l-Baha's correspondence would bring us any closer to valid generalizations about Abdu'l-Baha's teachings.

Objections were also raised to Vahid's estimate of 8,000 for the number of tablets of Abdu'l-Baha in existence. (This estimate was based on the fact that there are about 2,000 tablets in the American archives and about 5,000 in the Persian Archives.) It is well known that, at one period at least, Abdu'l-Baha was producing 90 tablets a day. At that rate, He would have finished 8,000 tablets in less than three months. Since Abdu'l-Baha's ministry covered 29 years, we should expect that his correspondence was very much larger than this. The small number of tablets in the American and Persian archives does not take into

account those on file in Haifa. Even so, it seems that the greatest number of Abdu'l-Baha's tablets are still in the hands of private individuals.

Class members asked Vahid how he regarded the Baha'i doctrine of infallibility with regard to Abdu'l-Baha's tablets. Speficically, he was aked, could the Master have made an error, historical or scientific, for example, in what He wrote? Vahid said he saw no such mistakes in anything he read, but if one turned up, it would have to be held in abeyance until thorough investigation could be conducted.

POINT/COUNTERPOINT DEPT. We received a letter from Margeret Fife of Yonkers, New York, taking exception to some statements appearing in the August 14 newsletter regarding Bob Ballenger's report: "Roles in Conflict: Baha'i Administration versus the Individual." A summary of the class discussion which followed Ballenger's report touched on the issue of censorship and the Baha'i Faith. It was noted that this attitude of suppression extends to the point where "Where Baha'is are being told they may not read books by enemies of the Cause nor by Covenant-Breakers. This is simply not true. Baha'is are not forbidden to read such books, although the community as a whole is discouraged from doing so."

Ms. Fife objected to this language in a seven-page letter, such of which consisted in quotes from various Baha'i writings including the *Will and Testament of Abdu'l-Baha* and *Star of the West*. The text of her letter is too long to be included here, but, in substance, she wrote, quoting from the Will and Testament:

> "One of the greatest and most fundamental principles of the Cause of God is to shun and avoid entirely the Covenant-Breakers, for they will utterly destroy the Cause of God, exterminate His Law and render of no account all efforts exerted in the past."

A bit later, she added, quoting from a Canadian Baha'i booklist, *The Power of the Covenant*:

> "Great danger is associated with reading material written by the Covenant-Breakers, and the strongest warnings are issued against such actions." And "… certain believers have the unpleasant duty of having to read such works in the course of their duty to protect the Faith – but the friends are warned, in the strongest terms, of the danger of reading such literature. Unless one is very

> well informed of the history of the Faith and is deeply confirmed in one's belief, the calumnies and distortions of truth contained in such literature can undermine one's faith."

BALLENGER REPLIES: Nothing Ms. Fife writes persuades me to change the conclusions stated in the August newsletter to which she objects. For one thing, she ignores the distinction between books by enemies of the Faith and Covenant-Breakers, evidently lumping these in the same class. That is falacious thinking, Baha'is are free to read whatever they please, including William Miller's books *The Baha'i Faith: Its History and Teachings*, which is relentlessly hostile in its assessment of the Faith. As regards literature by Covenant-Breakers, Baha'is are not, despite what Ms. Fife implies, expressly forbidden to read their works. (For one thing, such prohibition would violate the Baha'i principle of independent investigation of the truth, a principle that does not become null and void when someone signs a declaration card.) The report pointed out that the Baha'i Community is discouraged from reading Covenant-Breaker material, although, again, it is not forbidden to do so. This, it seems to me, is right in line with the quotations Ms. Fife cited in her letter, so I can't understand the grounds for her objections.

NEXT CLASS: Jon and Chris Hendershot recently attended the November session at the Bosch Baha'i School in Santa Cruz and will review a somewhat controversial class taught at the school. The major topic of the class was becoming a "born again" Baha'i, and the spiritual steps Baha'u'llah outlines for a personal rebirth. Also slated for discussion is a report on a video-tape shown at Bosch of a lecture by Peter Khan on the Baha'i concept of Collective Centers, what these are and how they work. The class will convene on Sunday, December 18, at 2 pm at the Hendershot home [Ed. Personal home address with directions and phone number follows].

[END DOCUMENT]

Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#23]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

This newsletter reports on various papers presented at the third annual Canadian Association for the Studies on the Baha'i Faith (later renamed the Association for Baha'i Studies Conference).

It includes a retelling of the Baha'i community of Ishqabad by Tony Lee (including some personal interpretation of why things turned out the way they did which turned out to be controversial enough to interrupt the slumber of most attendees); a paper on the legal status of LSAs (and its ramifications) and a paper on early Christian theology.

The newsletter also discusses a paper on the universal auxiliary language; proposing various candidates along with a brief pro/con debate. Personally, I would nominate Klingon. I know it wasn't around at the time of the writing of the newsletter and that it may seem a bit unusual to some, but come one! if you can google in it, it must be a real language, right? Only a *petaQ* would disagree.

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]

January, 1978 — Vol. III, No. 1
[Ed. personal home address]
Home of the "Idi Amin *Milk of*
Human Kindness Memorial Museum"
An unusually large turnout showed up for the January study class at which Tony Lee, Mehrdad Amanat, and Bob Ballenger reported on the Third Annual meeting of the Canadian Association for the Studies on the Baha'i Faith.

The CASBF meeting was held in Vancouver, British Columbia, over New Year's Weekend. More than 150 persons (roughly twice the number expected, including a bunch of

American interlopers) attended the conference. The sessions were held at a Catholic retreat called Rosemary Heights, about 20 miles outside Vancouver. The retreat is run by the Order of the Good Shepherd. (The nuns of this order appeared to be quite short, about 5 feet, or 5'2″ tops. Ballenger reported he caught himself singins the lyrics to Randy NEwman's current hit tune, "Short People.")

The papers which provoked the most comment and controversy at the conference had that same effect in the study class, wich began with Tony Lee talking about his paper, "City of Love: The Rise of the Baha'i Faith in Ishqabad from the Beginnings to the Russian Revolution." (The substance of that paper has been the topic of discussion in previous class sessions when Mr. Kazem Kazemzadeh of Santa Monica, who was born in Ishqabad, reviewed for us the early history of the Baha'i Community there.) Copies of Lee's paper, at $1 each, are available by writing Mrs. Paula Wahlstrom, [Ed. personal home address follows].

Essentially, to summarize Lee's paper, following the murder in 1889 of a prominent Baha'i in Ishqabad by hired Muslim assassins, the Baha'i Community appeared to be on the verge of a pogrom at the hands of Islamic fanatics. However, the Baha'is managed to persuade Russian government officials to intercede in the situation. The assassins and their accomplices were arrested and brought to trial. During the courtroom proceedings, the Czarist authorities accorded the Baha'is independent status, marking the first time the Faith had been given recognition by a government body as a separate religion from Islam.

The murderers were convicted and several were sentenced to be hanged. Despite pressure from the Muslim community, the Russian government refused to commute its death penalty judgement. However, the Baha'i Community was able to persuade czarist officials not to impose capital punishment in the case, and the status of the Community began to rise as a result of that gesture.

The Baha'i Community at Ishqabad began to flourish in the opening years of the 20th century. The world's first Mashriqu'l-Adhkar was constructed near the centre of town. Baha'i schools, a medical clinic, traveler's inn and other amenities were constructed. Baha'i merchants became active in the tea trade and it made many of them wealthy, especially during World War I. At the time of the Russian Revolution in 1917, tehre were about 500 Baha'i families – an estimated 4,000 believers – living in Ishqabad. In terms of

community life and social interaction, it was the most complete Baha'i Community in the history of the Faith.

The Communist takeover after the Revolution gradually changed all that. And this was the most controversial part of Lee's report. He said his research led him to conclude that the Community had become too complacent, wealthy, comfortable and unconcerned with the threat of a hostile Soviet regime. He noted that, partly because the Persians were foreigners in Russia, and partly because they were wealthy or at least well off, they were vulnerable to attack by the Communist government.

Lee stirred up a good deal of discussion by alluding to a "failure" of the Baha'i Community, although he did not say the Baha'is brought on the destruction of their Community by their own actions. In any event, the history of the Ishqabad Baha'i Community after the Revolution is one of a brief flowering and then increasingly severe oppression by the government and, finally, collapse.

Lee's analysis was criticized by a few people, especially Dr. Amin Banani of Santa Monica. He said the Baha'is did not bring about the destruction of their own Community, nor were they readily identifiable as a foreign element since all of southern Russia was heavily populated by Persians, Turkomans and other ethnic minorities who were regarded with suspicion and hostility. To Lee's assertions that the Baha'i Community remained oblivious to the intentions of the revolutionary Communist government and heedless of the fact it was on the verge of total destruction, Dr. Banani said there was nothing the Community leadership could have done. The doctrines and beliefs of the Communist regime were utterly at variance with Baha'i tenets, so a clash was inevitable, whatever the Baha'i might have done to avoid one, he said. The Baha'i Community was overtaken by events it could not control, including the Stalinist purges of the late 1930′s which swept the whole of the Soviet Union, jailing and executing thousands of people, including about 500 Baha'is, Dr. Banani noted. Even so, there remained to this day about 200 to 300 Baha'is living in Ishqabad, although they do not have an organized community. (The House of Worship in Ishqabad, seized by the Soviet authorities and later converted into an art gallery was severely damaged by an eathquake in 1948. It stood abandoned for a number of years before being razed as a public hazard.)

One other report that generated considerable discussion was a review of a paper presented at the Canadian conference by Richard Heiser, an attorney living in Sackville, New

Brunswick. Heiser's paper, "The Legal Personality of Baha'i Assemblies," covered the implications of incorporation for Local Assemblies.

Heiser noted (as Ballenger and Lee related in their report on his paper) that a corporation is, in the eyes of the law, a legal person. It has a birthday, the date of its incorporation; a birth certificate, its corporate charter; and a lifespan all its own. An unincorporated Local Assembly, on the other hand, comes under the legal definition of an association. Case law on associations is skimpy, unclear, and occasionally contradictory.

A corporation is not a natural being; it is a creation of the law. But, it has legal rights, a fact that until recently in human history, belonged only to living beings. Corporations have limited legal liability. For example, corporate debt is separate, in the eyes of the law, from the debts of corporation members or officers.

Corporations exist independently of the lives of their members. Heiser told a famous case in which an English corporation survived when all its officers were killed during a German bombing raid in World War II. The corporate officers dies, but the corporation they represented lived on. (An association, by contrast, ceases to exist when its members stop associating with one another. That has a parallel in the Baha'i Faith. An unincorporated Local Assembly ceases to exist when fewer than nine adult Baha'is live in the Community at Ridvan.)

The longevity of corporations poses some potential problems for incorporated Local Assemblies. For example, as fas as the law is concerned, an incorporated Assembly would continue to exist even if there were not enough adult Baha'is on hand to maintain the Assembly. If a group of Covenant-breakers managed to win control of an incorporated Assembly, Heiser said much havoc could be wreaked. This point, which Ballenger and Lee reported, stirred up much uneasy discussion among study class members. Several people pointed out that one of the by-laws of a Local Assembly requires its obedience to the National Spiritual Assembly, assuming that proviso would thwart Covenant-breakers. Such, however, is not the case. Unless and until a lawsuit is filed against the dissident group, seeking to enjoin it from using Assembly funds or corporate powers, as far as the law is concerned, it is proper for the Covenant-breakers to be in control. The law will not interfere in the internal management of a corporate body acting within its legal powers. So, while the National Assembly could revoke the administrative rights of some dissident members of an incorporated Assembly, that sanction would have no legal standing or effect on its

own. It would require a lawsuit (and presumably the filing of a request for a temporary restraining order or a preliminary injuntion) to block the Covenant-breakers. This news came as a surprise to a great many people and, as Heiser pointed out in his report to the Canadian Association, represents one of the rists of Assembly incorporation.

Three other papers reviewed at the study class deserve mention here. The first of these is Kay Balser's "Toward a Universal Auxiliary Language." While not an academic paper in the sense of breaking new ground, it did review the current state of affairs on where we stand on a common-tongue second language for mankind.

There has been not much movement in recent years towards selecting a universal auxiliary language. Many people (including Baha'is) more or less assume English will be selected as the language, mainly because of its widespread influence in the world. English is spoken and understood by an estimated 400 million people in the world. English, however, presents some difficult and probably insurmountable problems. The spelling is a nightmare; the language is not phonetic and it has borrowed many words from other langages. There is also a bewildering array of homonyms. English is loaded with ambiguities which the listener must sort out by understanding the context in which a sentence is uttered. (Jon Hendershot, who has studies linguistics, pointed out, however, that English is not alone in suffering a homonym problem. Most other languages also have words that sound alike, leaving the listener to figure out the proper meaning by understanding the context of the sentence.)

Perhaps the most serious drawback to the selection of English as the universal auziliary language is the political implications of choosing it. While English is acceptable to those nations which speak and understand it, the language represents a particular political and social system that is an anathema to other large and politically powerful nations. This same political stigma also would work against the selection of Chinese and Russian as worldwide secondary languages. That might mean that less politically tainted languages like Danish, Icelandic or Malay which are neutral could have a better chance of selection.

It might be possible to circumvent any political onus by selecting an older language, such as Latin. Although technically a 'dead' language (no one, aside from a few academics, speak it anymore), Latin was the universal auxiliary language of the Roman Empire and served as the medium of Western scholarship throughout the Middle Ages. Even so, Latin is losing ground as a candidate language.

Some scholars have suggested the invention of a new language as the best way to avoid the political implications of choosing an existing group. A number of attempts to invent a language have been made. The most famous of these is Esperanto, devised in 1887 by Ludovic Zamenhoff, a Polish linguist. Esperanto, however, has been criticized as being too westernized in its vocabulary and too rigid in its sentence construction to gain worldwide acceptance.

Ballenger reported that Balser commented that Baha'u'llah Himself may have favored Arabic or Persian, nothing those are the language of the Baha'i Revelation and Baha'u'llah praised Arabic as a language. However, one class member said that comment did not constitute an endorsement of Arabic and, if Baha'u'llah had wanted Arabic selected as the universal auxiliary language, He would have said so.

Despite its title, "Nazoraean/Ebionaean Christianity and the Emergence of Historical Theology," by Christopher Buck of Bellingham, Washington, was a provocative [and] unusual paper. Christianity today is essentially a Romanized faith, whereas the Christianity of Christ's time was much more oriental in flavor with a distinctly different dogma. The early Christians, who called themselves Nazoraeans, were a Hebrew people with an access to the entire gospel of Matthew written in Hebrew. They accepted this gospel as the most accurate and – significantly – rejected Paul as an apostate to Christianity. Specifically, the Nazoraeans refused to accept the Pauline doctrines which elevated and venerated the personage of Christ, saying that dogma corrupted Christianity by molding it to harmonize with Roman (that is, pagan) customs and practices. (The Hebrew Christians who opposed Paul, ironically introduced the concept of heresy in the early church.) The most serious breach was over the resurrection. The concept of bodily resurrection (which is a fundamental doctrine of Paul) was not unknown tothe Hebrew Christians, but they regarded it as no proof of prophethood and, at best, a minor theological point.

The Ebionaeans were the spiritual descendents of the Nazoraeans. The Ebionaeans fled Jerusalem during the time the Romans destroyed the city, about 132 AD. An important theological point with regard to both the Nazoraeans and the Ebionaeans is that neither group made much of the physical resurrection of Jesus. These early Christians tried to follow the example of the Apostle Peter and created a Hebrew Christianity, emphasizing the gospels of Matthew and Mark which center on the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. Paul disregarded that message and concentrated instead on the person of

Jesus, introducing the concept of salvation through personal relationship with Christ, and taking early Christianity outside its Hebrew framework by seeking converts among non-Jewish and pagan people. In the end, the Pauline doctrine emerged triumphant and dominates Christian theology to this day.

"Zarathustra and the Baha'i Faith" (Alan Coupe, Burlington, Ontario). Of all the Manifestations of God which Baha'is accept as forerunners to their religion, perhaps none is less well known than Zarathustra; although He, like Baha'u'llah, is of Persian origin. Zarathustra is sometimes called Zoroaster, the Greek version of His name. (Interestingly enough, scholars continue to accept "Zoroastrianism" as the proper name for the religion He brought.) One of the mysteries of Zoroastrianism is the approximate dates of Zarathustra's life. The exact times cannot be established with any certainty because reliable records simply no longer exist. Greek historians (Zarathustra is mentioned by Plato) place His birth at about 1,000 years before Christ. In his report to the Canadian conference, Coupe ventured into an elaborate aside on this issue, citing a variety of sources to place Zarathustra's time as about 1150 BC. He did so, he said, partly because one of the arguments William Miller uses in his book *The Baha'i Faith, Its History and Teachings*, a relentlesly hostile assessment of the Faith, is that Baha'is believe major Manifestations are separated in time by about 1,000 years. Because some scholars place Zarathustra and Buddha as both living at about 600 BC, Miller uses this 'argument' in an attempt to discredit the validity of Baha'i theological theory. (Members of our study class pointed out, however, that even if Zarathustra and Buddha were contemporaries, they existed in such different cultures and brought such different religious messages, that any coincidence in timing is irrelevant.)

One major reason so little about Zoroastrianism is known is that many of the writings of this religion were lost when the Greeks burned the library at Persepolis. Even so, the basic Zoroastrian gospels, the Avesta, survives, although in corrupted form. The Avesta is not easily translatable, mainly because it was composed in what is now an obscure, mysterious Persian dialect. At the heart of the Avesta are the 'gathas,' which were not discovered and translated until the 1850s. These 'hyms,' as they are called, are regarded by some experts as the only uncorrupted part of the Zoroastrian writings.

Zoroastrianism as a religion suffered a major blow with the Muslim conquest of Persia. Although there are today about 18,000 Zoroastrians living in Western Iran, most of the

religious community migrated to India at the time of the Muslim takeover. The immigrants settled in the Bombay area, where they remain to this day. There are now an estimated 90,000 Zoroastrians living in the world.

Zoroastrianism ought to be of more than passing interest to Baha'is. For one thing, Zarathustra helped create the cultural milieu that led to the Baha'i Faith. Historian Arnold Toynbee places Zoroastrianism in what he calls the 'Syrian' period of religious history. Other religions belonging to this period are Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Zoroastrianism shares with these faiths the concepts of a judgement day, a belief in heaven and hell, an end of the world concept, and an allegiance to a single deity. Baha'u'llah himself identified Zarathustra as a Manifestation of God and there are references to Zarathustra in the Baha'i Writings.

OTHER PAPERS: A list of papers which were to be presented at the Third Annual Meeting of the Canadian Association for Studies on the Baha'i Faith follows:

- Dr. Hussein Ahdieh, Douglaston, New York – "Tahirih, the Great Persian Poetess"
- Kay Baltaser, Edmonds, Washington – "Towards a Universal Auxiliary Language"
- William Barnes, Lansing, Michigan – "Human Rights as God-Given Rights"
- Keith Bloodworth, Stonewall, Manitoba – "In Seach of a New Visual Myth"
- Christopher Buck, Bellingham, Washington – "Nazoraean/Ebionaean Christianity and the Emergence of Historical Theology"
- Alan Coupe, Burlington, Ontario – "Zarathustra and the Baha'i Faith"
- Dr. Hossein Danesh, Ottawa, Ontario – "Health and Healing"
- Dr. M.R. Finley, Jr. Quebec, Quebec – "Uses of the Computer and Related Micro-technologies in the Evolving World Order"
- Dr. A.M. Ghadirian, Pierrefonds, Quebec – "Count Leo Tolstoy and the Baha'i Faith"
- Kenneth Goldstone, Vancouver, BC – "The World Centre of the Baha'i Faith: An Analysis of the Sacred Landscape"
- Richard Heiser, Sackville, NB – "The Legal Personality of Baha'i Assemblies"
- Anthony Lee, Los Angeles, California – "The Rise and Fall of the Russian Baha'i Community: An Historical Sketch"
- Jane Nishi-Goldstone, Vancouver BC – "A Review of *Maitrya-Amitabha Has Appeared* by Jamshed Fozdar"

- Dr. Anne Schoonmaker, Summit, New Jersey – “Erikson and the Worldwide Crisis of Identity”

Ahdieh, Barnes, Finley and Ghadirian failed to show up at the conference and, so, their papers were not heard.COMING ATTRACTIONS: For out next class, we have invited Dr. John Cornell, a Baha’i dentist from Reedley, California, to lecture to us on “Baha’i Justice” – what it is and how it works. Dr. Cornell is a co-compiler of a course on Baha’i Law published by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the Hawaiian Islands. We have recently received the following in a letter from Dr. Cornell:

Baha’is are solidly in agreement on many points, but recently I became aware of differing views on two questions. At the CASBF conference, I polled as many people as possible and found them evenly divided on the following:

Should Baha’is expect to (1) slowly become a majority over the next centuries, co-exist with all other faiths until the next Messenger of God, or (2) soon become a totality (everyone calling himself a Baha’i)?

Did Baha’u’llah give institutions such as the Houses of Justice (local and international) (1) purely for religious administration to function alongside a secular civil government with separation of church and state, or (2) to become government replacing all existing government?

What is YOUR view?

As the topic of the next study class is justice, please come prepared to tell what is wrong with the following real life statements:

“Justice and mercy are exactly the same thing: they’re just two different words.”

“Why did Baha’u’llah praise ‘the just kings’? I guess because they were the most merciful.”

“When the Assembly adjudicates a dispute between two people, it is important to always temper justice with mercy.”

“The purpose of unity is the appearance of justice among men.”

“Justice can be defined as whatever is best for the majority.”

“Justice is for each of us to work according to our ability and be paid according to our needs.”

“Justice is for everybody to be paid the same.”

“When Baha’u’llah speaks of equity He is referring to the British courts of equity.”

The class on Baha’i law with meet on Sunday, February 12, at 2 pm in the palatial and breathtaking environs of Tony Lee’s apartment [Ed. personal home address follows].

LOOSE TALK: While Tony Lee and Bob Ballenger were at the CASBF conference, they conned the organizers into letting them make an announcement about our study group. That resulted in a dozen or so Canadian Baha’is asking to be put on our mailing list. They should be receiving this as their first newsletter from us. Welcome, and remember: if all else fails, these pages can be used to wrap fish or, in a weather emergency, as a stand-in rainhat.

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Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#24]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

This latest edition of the LA Class Newsletter deals with Pilgrim’s Notes. If you are unfamiliar with that term, it means notes taken by individual Baha’is of conversations between themselves and central Figures of the Faith (Baha’u’llah, Abdu’l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi). Usually they contain a diary like account of the travel to Israel, topics of conversations and other general impressions or reflections. They are informal and of dubious quality since they are not an direct audio recording nor instantaneous transcripts. Rather they are the product of a fallible memory. Yet, historians and scholars of the Baha’i Faith do use them as one of their sources. Also, Pilgrim’s Notes have varying levels of

quality. Some can be ‘checked’ against other Pilgrim’s Notes while some were even submitted to the central figure themselves and sent back to the individual believer as ‘confirmed’.

Back in the 1970s, without the marvel of the internet as a central repository of knowledge, there wasn’t an easy way to access such dispersed personal accounts. This is why they were so much more special back then. As you will see below, it was a real treat for Baha’is to read and examine a real Pilgrim’s Note. If you’re interested to find more, a good place to start is here.

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]
Hermosa Beach, California 90254
Local Slogan: “Amnesty for Darth Vader.”

LA Study Class Newsletter [#25]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

This edition of the LA Class newsletter primarily deals with the Baha’i perspective on justice. As well it includes a discussion of a paper by Peter Smith, a British Baha’i theologian, regarding ‘motifs’ in the Babi and Baha’i Dispensation.

I only wish to make two small comments. First, the Persian word ‘Insaf’ is translated as ‘equity’ below (referenced to Shoghi Effendi) but it has much broader connotations. In some instances, it can mean virtue, justice, righteous, moral, propriety, and objectivity. To give you an idea of the complexity, it is considered a rather harsh insult to call someone in Persian: ‘bi-insaf’ or ‘without-insaf’.

Second, the class notes mention

> After the death of the Manifestation — Baha'u'llah — Abdu'l-Baha, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice became, in turn, the central authorities.

Although this account can be argued to be, strictly speaking, factual; a study of history and the Baha'i administrative order, would show it to be overly simplistic. According to the *Will and Testament of Baha'u'llah* (known as the Book of the Covenant), Muhammad Ali, the older half-brother of Abdu'l-Baha was to inherit the position of Center of the Covenant. Muhammad Ali failed to do so because he was declared a Covenant-Breaker and cast out of the Baha'i community by Abdu'l-Baha. As well, it is incorrect to imply that the authority flows from Shoghi Effendi (as the person fulfilling the institution of the Guardianship) to the Universal House of Justice. Even a cursory reading of the *Will and Testament of Abdu'l-Baha* will show that in the Baha'i administrative order, the two institutions were linked inseparably and created to operate together, albeit with distinct spheres of authority.

There are two diagrams depicting the 'motifs' discussed in Peter Smith's paper and I will re-do them so they are easier to read. Expect them to be uploaded in a little while.

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]

Hermosa Beach, California 90254
"The Last Place God Created."
(On Saturday just before midnight)

Vol. III, No. 3 — March, 1978

"The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice," Baha'u'llah wrote in *The Hidden Words*. "The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men," He said in the Words of Paradise. The Baha'i Faith may be unique among the world's religions in this emphasis on justice as a fundamental spiritual goal — a stand that is misunderstood, misonstrued and misapplied, even by the Baha'is. That viewpoint was expressed in our March study class by Dr. John Cornell, a dentist from the Central California town of

Reedley. He has been a Baha'i for many years and has made the study of Baha'i justice — what it is and how it works — something of a pet project. Dr. Cornell's lecture to our class was based upon a deepening course booklet, *Six Lessons on Baha'i Law*. The course book, of which Dr. Cornell is the co-author, is available for $2 from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the Hawaiian Islands.

Dr. Cornell told our class that the topic of justice is an uncomfortable one in Chritian America. This is partly because national attitudes equate the law and justice with oppression and a restriction on the freedoms we enjoy. Also, he suggested, there may be subconscious guilt feelings regarding justice in our predominantly Christian culture. That religion assumes sin to be the prevailing condition in human society (as witness the outmoded but still potent theological concept of Original Sin). By way of illustration, Dr. Cornell told of being on an interreligious panel, the members of which were asked what what they would most like to see accomplished on earth. When his turn came, following Baha'u'llah's lead, he said, "Justice." That remark produced some gasps from other panel members, who were less than happy with the prospect of justice in the world. Why would they react this way? he asked. One explanation is that, under a mental attitude in which Christians routinely consider themselves to be "guilty" of "sinning," justice is not a state of existence which they would eagerly anticipate.

Dr. Cornell called justice a complex topic. Everyone has an idea of what it means, but these views seldom agree. Each side in a conflict, whether it be in court or on the battlefield, claims to have justice on its side. Turning to history, Dr. Cornell said justice is an ancient concept. The word itself comes from a Latin root, meaning duty or obligation, somthing that is praiseworthy but, at the same time, obligatory. Humans may have no birthright to charity, but it is widely recognized that they have a right to justice.

The history of justice is influenced by three main schools of European thinking, wihch saw justice in terms of Positive Law, Social Good and Natural Right. Positive Law holds that justice and the law are the same; to conform to the law is justice. To disobey or ignore the law is injustice. Under such thinking, there can be no such thing as an unjust law. The Social Good theory states that justice and mercy are synonymous. If one does good for people, one is performing justice. Under the Natural Right concept, it is believed that we all come into this world with certain inalienable rights. It is justice to recognize and uphold

these human rights. (This attitude has influenced Baha'i thinking, reflecting itself, for example, in the Baha'i bumper sticker: "Human Rights are God-given Rights".)

The fact that people don't agree on what justice is presents social problems. Dr. Cornell said Shoghi Effendi evidently made a distinction between justice and equity by calling them companion concepts. In the Baha'i Faith, the word "justice" is translated from the Arabic word "'Adl." For example, the term "Baytu'l-'Adl" means "House of Justice." On the othrer hand, the word "Insaf" is used to mean "fairness," which Shoghi Effendi usually translated as "equity."

From this distinction, Dr. Cornell said, "'Adl" is used to signify the justice that comes through law, while "Insaf" equates to how the individual perceives and applies justice (or, more properly, equity) in his or her relations with other people. Elaborating on the Baha'i concept of justice, he explained this as being a system based on the principle of reward and punishment — but not retribution. The concept of retribution or retaliation is based on the notion of striking back, getting even. *Old Testament* justice teaches "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." (This once was a progressive concept for, in the time of Moses, it limited revenge to a strictly measure-for-measure principle. If one man blinded another man, the victim did not have the right to kill his assailant, but merely blind him. The system halted a potential escalation of violence in pursuit of justice.) Dr. Cornell said that Shoghi Effendi's translation and use of Baha'u'llah's words indicate that, in Baha'i justice, the concept of punishment is used in the sense of training; the miscreant is punished as a lesson to him, to train him not to disobey the law. It is through the application of Baha'i law that justice is this day will be accomplished.

This view triggered disagreement among class members. Some people argue that Baha'i law will not produce justice in all cases.

While it might lead to a just social order, it could also cause hardships to some individuals who are forced to conform to its standards. Citing the example of the marriage law, it was pointed out that the requirement of parental consent can exact a penalty on two people who want to marry. If one of the natural parents refuses to grant consent — even on frivolous or unreasonable grounds — there is absolutely no recourse. Baha'i institutions cannot compel consent, and even have no right of interference. So, while, in the long run, the concept of parental consent presumably will have beneficial efects, it can mean grief and disappointment in individual cases.

Dr. Cornell also took the position that Baha'is, as individuals, are incapable of administering justice. He said, in the Faith, Baha'i Assemblies should practice justice. That is, they should apply Baha'i laws, and not temper them with mercy. This, he pointed out, conflicts with Christian concepts of justice, which regard man as sinful and justice as an awe-inspiring, fear-invoking process. Justice, in the Christian view, would crush the spirit of man, were mercy not used to lessen its impact. Dr. Cornell, however, separated the concepts of justice and mercy. Mercy, he said, is to be applied on an individual level, on a one-to-one basis. He cited a passage from the Baha'i Writings: "If someone commits an error and wrong toward you, you must instantly forgive him," Abdu'l-Baha wrote in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (p. 154). However, the Master also wrote, "If a person commits a crime against you, you have not the right to forgive him…" (*Paris Talks*, p. 154). The point here is that when a crime — an offense against the public — which is punishable by law — is committed, the criminal is to be punished and not forgiven. An individual may forgive a criminal act committed against him, but the Baha'i society, in its administration of justice, may not. The purpose of punishment in the Baha'i Faith is to train a person not to commit another crime.

While Dr. Cornell separated the concepts of justice and mercy, he did not define them as mutually exclusive. He cited a letter of Shoghi Effendi (printed on page 8 of *Baha'i News*, No. 98), to the effect that local and national Assemblies "should act tactfully, patiently and in a friendly and kindly spirit" toward Baha'is who are misbehaving. Rather than demanding instant and strict adherence to Baha'i laws, Assemblies, the Guardian wrote, "should try to gradually persuade them of the wisdom and necessity" of obeying the law, "instead of thrusting upon them" a new principle. "Too severe and immediate action in such cases is not only fruitless, but actually harmful. It alienates people instead of winning them to the Cause."

One point made by Dr. Cornell is that individuals, including Baha'is lack the capacities to administer justice to other people.

Not everyone could agree with this view. Some class members argued that a parent can act in a just manner in resolving a dispute between her children. Likewise, a teacher who settles an argument between students also has the authority and the capacity to act justly.

Another topic that generated class discussion and disagreement was the concept of limitations of power in the Baha'i Faith. Some Baha'is, Dr. Cornell said, are under the

impression that Baha'i Assemblies have virtually unlimited power and can do anything they please. He called this a misstamtement of fact and, using a quotation from Shoghi Effendi, took the view that even the Manifestation of God faces limits in what He or She may do or decree. "So great and transcendental is this principle of Divine justice… that Baha'u'llah Himself subordinates His personal inclination and wish to the all-compelling force of its demands and implications. 'God is My witness:' He thus explains, 'were it not contrary to the Law of God, I would have kissed the hand of My would-be murderer, and would cause him to inherit My earthly goods. I am restrained, however, by the binding Law laid down in the Book…'" (*Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 22-23)

If Baha'u'llah Himself was limited in His powers, then local and national Assemblies are likewise restricted in what they can do, despite individual opinions to the contrary, Dr. Cornell said. Class members had little difficulty with this viewpoint. It is a fairly well-known fact that, if an individual disagrees with an action of his local Assembly, he can appeal that ruling to the national Assembly and even to the Universal House of Justice, for a final decision. But one class member raised a tantalizing hypothesis. In a sense, he argued, the House of Justice can do whatever it wants to. If the House makes a decision that an individual feels to be in error, the person is in no position to do anything about the situation. There is no appeal from that ruling, no higher authority to invoke. Since the House not only legislates matters not explicitely revealed in the Writings of Baha'u'llah, but also rules when and how these Writings apply, it has virtually limitless power. A Baha'i may be sincerely convinced that the House of Justice is wrong with regard to some particular decision, but that opinion is of no avail. The House is the supreme authority, and that's it, folks. Therefore, the class member argued, the House has unlimited discretion within its sphere of jurisdiction — and that sphere is the entire world.

UPDATE: Last month, our class spent some time discussing a paper written by Peter Smith, an English Baha'i who teaches at the University of Lancaster in Great Britain. That paper, entitled "The Routinization of Charisma: Some Comments on Peter L. Berger's 'Motif Messianique et Processus Social Dans Le Bahaisme'" received a quick once over and some brief comments during our February session. We had to hold up our report on that discussion while Tony Lee sought Mr. Smith's permission to include portions of his paper in our newsletter. That consent has arrived and here is a summary of our discussion.

In his study on the "The Routinization of Charisma," Smith analyzes Berger's work on the transplantation of the Baha'i Faith from East to West and, more importantly, the transformation of the Faith from the charismatic religious experience as shaped by the living Prophet to how this aura of authority is made into everyday routine in Baha'i practice, hence the title "The Routinization of Charisma".

Smith divides Baha'i history into eleven time periods, and charts themes (or "motifs" as they are called) which underlie Baha'i history in each of these periods (see chart). Each motif represents a theme within a religious movement that characterizes a view of the world and molds the religious practice.

Smith identifies four "motifs" or basic themes within the Babi-Baha'i Dispensation. These are "Polar," which he asserts is distinctive to ISlam and the Baha'i Faith, and presents a central authority (the person of the Prophet — Arabic: Gutb) as a commanding figure who must be obeyed under all circumstances. (After the death of the Manifestation — Baha'u'llah — Abdu'l-Baha, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice became, in turn, the central authorities.)

Smith's second theme is "Messianic," that is, the expectation among the body of the religious faithful of the coming of a Messiah. In the Baha'i Faith, this played directly off Shi'ah Islamic beliefs of a religious fulfillment and, later, in the Babi movement, the arrival of "Him Whom God Would Make Manifest," which if one of the major themes of the Bayan. After the arrival of Baha'u'llah, the messianic theme faded in importance and influence as a force in the Baha'i Faith.

The third theme is "Legalistic" or relating to the authority of the Prophet. This began in the years immediately preceding the Babi-Baha'i Dispensation as an acceptance of the Islamic Shar'ah (or Muslim code of laws derived from the Qur'an), but was dominated by a messianic expectation. The Islamic Shar'ah was replaced by a Babi Shari'ah and, later, by anarchistic tendencies among some of the early Babis when they revolved against the poer of the government of 19th century Persia. With the advent of the Baha'i Revelation, and the development of Baha'i law and administration, these became the mainstays of the legalistic theme Smith writes of.

His final "motif" is "Esoteric-Gnostic." This referst to the concept of secret knowledge, possessed only by a few religious insiders. This phenomenon was quite strong during the

pre-Babi period, but gradually faded with the advent of the Bab and Baha'u'llah. Curiously, it enjoyed a brief resurgence during the 20th century. As the Faith began to spread in the West, it did so as a semi-secret movement, passing along on a one-to-one "insider's" basis. With the rise of the Baha'i administrative order, this "esoteric-gnostic" motif waned and now has almost completely disappeared.

The fact that two of the four themes Smith identified — Messianic and Esoteric-Gnostic — have all but faded from the picture, and that there has been no change in the other two since period #6, led some class members to wonder if they hav not been replaced by other "motifs" which may have been missed in his analysis of Baha'i history. Smith's analysis is more suggestive for Babi history than it is for Baha'i history.

It also was noted that the concept of a "Polar" motif (which gives rise to the Covenant) is wholly absent from Christian theology and perhaps even alien to that religious experience. This concept is even difficult to exlain to Christians. It was useful to have it recognized in Smith's paper.

WHO'S WHO: (a short course, limited to persons under 5'2″ of 1.75 meters, whichever comes first). From time to time, we receive mail, cryptically addressed to "study class notes" or some othe innocuous cover name at the Hermosa Beach address which appears atop these newsletters. For the record (fi anyone out there cares), although we are casually organized, here's a rundown on who does what for our class. ANTHONY LEE of Los Angeles is our ringleader and enfant terrible. He lines up our speakers, occasionally filling in himself when there is a gap in the list and more or less (more more than less) runs the show. He also whips up one heck of a fine Quiche Lorraine (but don't bother asking for the recipe, its a family secret). CHRIS HENDERSHOT of Manhattan Beach types up these newsletters without complaint… or pay or praise… or anything else, either. She and her husband will soon be off to pioneer in Venezuela, no doubt as the best way to escape the chose of trying to puzzle out the tortured prose of BOB BALLANGER of Hermosa Beach, who writes (or, as irate guest speakers might phrase it, "distorts, misrepresents and trashes") the class sessions. Ballenger also is responsible for the series of lame puns and other outrageous asides herein contained. And, it is his address which appears on the heading of these newsletters. So, when writing with commments, threats or reactions, please address the envelopes to him. And, finally, there is PAULA WAHLSTROM of Maywood, our treasurer, bookkeeper and secret witness. She's the lady to whom you pay

your dues, which are probably, even as you read this, now due. Pay up. It's only 12 bucks a year. Cheap at twice the price, gang. Re-new now. We need the dinero. (Send to Paula at [Ed. personal address withheld])

NEXT CLASS: For our next act, we are hoping to recruit one of the three National Spiritual Assembly members (Dr. Dorothy Nelson, Judge James Nelson or Richard Betts) who live in Southern California to come and discuss "The Crisis in the Five Year Plan." As most of you probably know, the American Baha'i community is poised on the brink of disaster with regard to winning the goals of the Plan. If we can't get an NSA member, we'll dredge up some other topic for discussion. The next class will be held on SUNDAY, APRIL 16, at 2 pm in the home of Richard Bruce, [Ed. personal address withheld]. See you there!

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Related Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#26]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

The main topic of this edition of the newsletter is a discussion of the 5 Year Plan (1974-79) and its goals. It includes the thoughts of a then member of the US NSA (Betts) and also mentions, very frankly, a marked decrease in the growth rate of the Baha'i community – as measured by new enrollments. This decrease in growth has since continued and just recently there was a comment from a person at the US National Assembly that it is currently the lowest (since records have been kept). The Baha'i community in the US is in danger of total quantitative stagnation. I'd like to talk about this and explore it is so and perhaps offer some salient ideas about how it may be reversed. But that will be for a future post.

As well, the newsletter includes a few more reader's comments. They show not only how far reaching the newsletter was but just what exactly individual Baha'is thought of it.

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

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Hermosa Beach, California 90254
“Have you hugged your
boa constrictor today?”

Vol. III, No. 4 — April, 1978

It seemed, back in 1973, the American Baha’i Community had at last — at long last — turned the corner. We came off the Nine Year Plan in blitzkrieg fashion. Toward the end of the Plan, new Local Assemblies were being formed at a pace of more than 100 a year. By the year’s end, there were over 900 Local Spiritual Assemblies in the country. The ranks of the believers were expanded as never before.

When the House of Justice established the new Five Year Plan (1974-79) goals at 1,400 Local Assemblies in the United States, there was no doubt that we could achieve that mark — and not even have to strain much to do so.

It is now four years since the House set domestic expansion goals for America, we are nowhere near attaining most of them. We have about 1,000 Assemblies (roughly 50 to 100 more than when we began work in 1973). The Faith, once bursting with enthusiastic growth, seems to have stagnated for the last several years. What went wrong?

Essentially, that is the question our study class asked Richard Betts, one of three members of the National Spiritual Assembly living in the Los Angeles are. At 39, Betts is the yougest member of the national body. He has served on the NSA since July, 1973.

He summarized passages from the Writings, noting that the purpose of man is to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization and that the goal of the World Order of Baha’u’llah is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race. This principle of the oneness of mankind is the distinguishing characteristic of the Faith, Betts said, noting that the role of religion is to spiritualize the human race and act as the best means of

establishing world order. All pretty basic stuff, all of which we are pretty much familiar with.

These idealistic goals will be attained through a slow but steady growth process in which the Faith permeates and influences the affairs of man, Betts said. And then he read from an address that few — if any — of us had heard of or knew about. In 1953, Ruhiyyih Khanum represented Shoghi Effendi at the dedication ceremonies of the Wilmette House of Worship. At that time, she read on his behalf, what amounted to an analysis of the historical states of the spiritual development of mankind. Shoghi Effendi's ten-stage survey of humanity's spiritual growth began by describing the first period as a 6,000-year-long epoch during which various Manifestations began the transformation of the human race. The second period culminated with the declaration of the Bab in 1844. Period three ended with the Bab's martyrdom before a military firing squad in Tabriz, Iran. The fourth period began with Baha'u'llah's incarceration in the Siyah Chal [Ed. the Black Pit, alt: Siyyah-Chal] and His realization of His religious mission. Period five covered the declaration of Baha'u'llah in the Garden of Ridvan. The sixth step included Baha'u'llah's banishment to Adrianople and 'Akka, and the period of His letters to the kings and rulers of the planet. The seventh period covered the beginning of Abdu'l-Baha's ministry while still held in the Most Great Prison and His writing of the Tablets of the Divine Plan — the first organized approach to the systematic expansion of the Faith. Period eight covered the series of national plans, the First and Second Seven Year Plans ending respectively, in 1944 and 1953. Period nine in this spiritual development of the human race ended with the centenary of the declaration of Baha'u'llah at the Ridvan Garden (1963). The final period covers the penetration of the Faith to all corners of the planet and numerous crusades in carrying the message to all. We are now in that final period.

Bretts said the current Five Year Plan is best understood in the perspective of all this. The plan involves consolidating victories won in previous plans, a vast expansion of the number of locations where Baha'is reside, and the development of the distinctive character of Baha'i life. With respect to attaining these goals, Bretts pointed out that we have pretty much preserved the victories of earlier plans and have at least begun the process of developing the distinctive character of Baha'i life. This last is a qualitative goal and one which is somewhat difficult to measure in terms of success. The development of the Comprehensive Deepening Program represents an effort by the National Spiritual

Assembly to begin work on that goal. The revamping of the declaration and enrollment process also is an outgrowth of that goal.

But, the nub of the issue — the homefront expansion and consolidation of the Baha'i localities — is another story. At the beginning of the Five Year Plan, our goals were to have at least 7,000 localities in the United States where Baha'is reside. We now have about 5,000 such places. We were to have at least 1,400 Local Spiritual Assemblies, including no fewer than 25 on Indian reservations. We are barely above the 1,000 mark. (Betts mentioned that the NSA thought the Indian reservation quota would be the toughest domestic goal to win; instead, it was one of the first accomplished.) Class members asked him if there had been a dro in the enrollment rate which might explain some of the slowing growth trend. He replied that adult enrollment is growing slightly, although youth enrollment is down. And he put the current American Baha'i population at about 70,000 persons.

Indicating that the problem of the American Baha'i Community is not as grave as it would seem, Betts said the relocation of as few as 200-300 Baha'is could mean the difference between winning and losing the homefront goals. Even so, the NSA member said, "Things are now down to the 11th hour and we have a lot to do before midnight." He was asked if the American Baha'i Community isnot, in fact, teetering on the brink of disaster with respect to winning the plan goals. Betts responded that this is not the first time the Community has come right down to the wire before making its goals. The First and Second Seven Year Plans were both won in the final year; it was only in the Nine Year Plan (completed in 1973) that the homefront goals were achieve much before the deadline. He explained his optimism by saying, "If one loses genuine confidence, then defeat is at hand."

Perceiving a new mood of success following a successful Baha'i proclamation earlier this year in the small border town of El Centro, California, just north of Mexico, Betts said "all we need is a handful of Baha'is" and victory "is still possible."

He also touched on some of the negative aspects of the American Baha'i Community, noting that the divorce rate among Baha'i couples appears to be on the rise and the number of youth enrollments is dropping. Enrollments are coming in at a rate of about 150 a month, which Betts called a "very slow growth" for the Faith in the United States. He said National Assembly members are watching for any signs of a growth spurt, figuring any

place where about 500 persons enroll in the Faith during the course of a year heralds the "entry by troops in the Cause."

That remark triggered a reaction among class members, many of whom voiced displeasure at he entire mass teaching/mass enrollment concept. Betts, however, defended the practice, saying it had been almost totally misunderstood and misapplied in home front teaching. Teaching the masses means reaching most Americans with the Baha'i message. Somehow this idea got twisted into a campaign that concentrated on the poor. A further complication arose when the notion got out that teaching the masses also meant taking an indirect approach to the Faith, that is, teaching the Baha'i Faith without mentioning Baha'u'llah. That practice soon led to trouble with persons being enrolled in the Faith without having any real idea of what they were doing. When word og this reached Wilmette, the National Assembly stepped in and bega downplaying teaching the masses until someone could figure out how to make the idea work as it was designed. Even though teaching the masses, or mass teaching, depending on who is using he phrase, has been misinterpreted and misused, Betts said the total effect of the experimet has been a good one. The mass teaching concept shook up a placid Baha'i administration and forced local communities to become more flexible in their approach to teaching the Faith.

Betts shed some light on a question that perplexed class members (and many others in the American Baha'i Community). In the early 1970′s, the Community's growth rate was steady, if not phenomenal. We were riding the crest of a boom and — suddendly — things went bust. For the last four years we have been unsuccessful at doing the same thing that worked in the period of the late 1960′s and early 1970′s. Class members asked Betts: What went wrong?

Essentially, he said, the mood of the country took a turn that the Baha'i Community failed to follow. The 1960′s was a period of intense social activism. Beginning with the civil rights movement and ending with the anti-Vietnam war activism, people were involved in causes on a collective level. Individuals put their lives on the line for one movement or another. This was a good time for the Faith. Our social principles enjoyed broad appeal and many people were attracted to the Faith because of these ideals. But somewhere in the early 1970′s, the public mood shifted. The Vietnam war ended on a sour note. Americans became more introspective and introverted. Self-improvement became trendy and a variety

of self-realization movements came into vogue. People turned from social activism to personal concerns and materialism reestablished its influence.

But the Baha'i teaching strategy did not change and there was no effort to capitalize on this new mood, Betts said. Instead of emphasizing the power of the Faith to spiritually transform individuals, we kept plonking at the same old themes which, by the mid-1970′s, had simply lost much of their punch. The Baha'i Faith has not addressed the issue of personal salvation in its teaching work, eventhough no religious revelation in the history of man has more to say about how man can related to God, Betts said.

Looking ahead, he said issues that remain to be resolved include the racial question which has been relatively calm in recent years, but which could flare up at any time. Racial polatization remains very much in effect in the United States and, while a measure of racial equality has been attained, race unity still elludes us. Baha'is, at least, are committed to the concept of racial unity, althoughmuch more needs to be done within the Community. He also sugested that the American Baha'i Community would do well to emphasize the issues of morality and rectitude of conduct among the believers and the administrative institutions, as well. Betts said that, while we are now in a cycle of personal awareness and emphasis on the individual, that could give way to, say, more nationwide awareness of human rights as an issue (one of the major themes of the Carter administration).

One of the persistent problems of the American Baha'i Community is bureaucracy and dysfunction at the National Office. Class members asked Betts about that. He conceded there are staff problems at the National Center, saying there is too much lag time between teh presentation of a problem and its resolution. A large administrative load is handled by relatively few people, and staff turnover compounds the problem. Betts said one of the distressing aspects of this is that, in some cases, employees at the National Center have exercized what amounts to a "pocket veto" by simply refusing to carry out policies or directives with which they did not agree. In other cases, people are sincere but so afraid of doing the wrong thing that they take excrutiating — and time consuming — care trying to follow instructions from the National Assembly.

Motivating the American Baha'i Community and getting the National Center on track is a "slow and difficult process" with its ups and down, Betts said. But, optimism and the conviction that we are making progress prevails and, "if we lose that sense that victory is ours, we will taste defeat much more often," he commented.

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HUMBLE APOLOGIES DEPT. We regret the fact that our April newsletter is so late in coming out. The reason is that shiftless Bob Ballenger did not get around to writing up the notes until recently. He's a newspaper reporter and claims that the pressure of writing stories on California's June 6 primary election kept him from getting to the notes. That may even be true. Ballenger promises everything will be normal with him… atleast until the November general elections.

LETTERS DEPT.

We got a note from Dr. John Cornell of Reedley, California, who taught our class on Baha'i justice in March. While complimenting us on the newsletter summary, he wrote, "I would like to call your attention to one error, however. It was not I who said that individuals cannot administer justice. I maintain just the opposite. It is easy to understand how you could have thought that came from me, because ideas were bouncing around the room think and fast. It is precisely to counteract what we consider to be this mistaken notion that we made a special section on justice by individuals on pp. 28-29 of our study course, Six Lessons on Baha'i Law."

Nahed Rushdy of Barrhead, Alberta, Canada, writes: "It's amazing how efficient these California Baha'is are. I've been receiving your newsletter since the annual meeting of the Association of Baha'i Studies in Vancouver [in late December, 1977] and I've been planning to write and tell you how much I enjoy reading it… Reading the newsletter is almost like being there in person. It's great food for thought while I'm working in a small country town in Northern Alberta. Hope to make it to the class some day."

Sohaila Samimi of Portugal writes: "Thanks so much for sending me the newsletter — not that I agree with or enjoy reading every single one. I personally think the scathing remarks are absolutely not mind-opening an dconstructive and sound like they belong to the mid-'60s. The beauty of giving an intelligent, gentle but precise and loving idea is what is so unique about the Faith. It has never been tried before and, if so, has been abandoned as impossible — which makes the challenge all the more exhilarating and mind blowing. I do not think blasting people and tearing them apart does anything except ease the frustration in our hearts and furnish an easy channel for our egos and makes this beautiful refuge as cold and lifeless as the rest of the world. Excuse the poetry, but it's not gentle rain of spring

that opens blossoms and buds. By all means, inquire and probe and think and so on — but actually what are we doing in the name of open-mindedness and etc?"

Alan Coupe of Burlington, Ontario, Canada writes: "Thanks very much for putting me on the list for the study class notes. I enjoyed reading the commentary on my presentation (Zarathustra and the Baha'i Faith, at the Canadian Association conference in Vancouver). Did someone use a tape recorder? If not, then they took very good notes. You may be interested in knowing that the Universal House [of Justice] has advised me in a letter that there is nothing in the Baha'i writings to suggest that 2 or more Manifestations cannot appear at the same time."

CHANGE OF CLASS TREASURER: Please note that from now on class newsletter subscriptions should be sent to: Mr. Anthony Lee, [Ed. personal address follows]. Subscriptions are $12 per year (12 issues) for those living in the United States and are free for those outside the U.S. Back issues and copies of written presentations are $1 apiece for all.

NEXT CLASS: Since these notes are being sent very late, it should be noted that the next class was already held — on May 7. Notes from that class are being prepared and will be sent out in June. Since they probably will not be mailed before the June class, however, we wish to notify everyone that the next class session will be Sunday, June 4, at 2:00 pm at the home of Tony Lee [Ed. personal address and phone nuber follows]. The topic of the class will be John S. Hatcher's essay "The Mataphorical Nature of Physical Reality." All class members will be expected to have read the most recent issue of World Order (the Summer 1977 issue) and was published as Vol. No. 3 of Etudes Baha'i Studies, a publication of the Canadian Association for Studies on the Baha'i Faith.

[END DOCUMENT]

Related Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#27]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

This is a very informative edition of the LA Class Study Notes because it contains a summary along with discussion of the papers presented at the 1978 Baha'i Studies Seminar held at the University of Lancaster. Inside you can find out such interesting tidbits as: the history of the Finnish Baha'i community, the interaction of the early Babi and Baha'i community with Christian misionaries, whether the Bab claimed to be sent by the Hidden Imam or to *be* the Hidden Imam, the reconciliatory nature of Baha'i mysticism, whether the early American Baha'i community was as disorganized as usually thought and finally the already discussed history of the Baha'is of Ishqabad (Mentioned in the notes previously here, here, here and here) .

If this is your first newsletter, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]

Hermosa Beach, California 90254

May, 1978
Vol. III, No. 5

NOTWITHSTANDING his long and valiant service to our study class, our faithful note-taker and scribe left for the day our last class held on May 7th at the Hendershot abode. We therefore have a substitute scribbler who may or may not be able to make sense out of the proceedings any better. Please, therefore, forgive the inaccuracies in reporting and the typos since this is all new to this pen-holding hand.

Our speaker at this gathering was Tony Lee who recently returned from an international Baha'i Studies Seminar held at the University of Lancaster in England. The seminar was sponsored jointly by the Departments of Religious Studies and Sociology at the institution through the encouragement of Peter Smith, a Baha'i who is a graduate student there. Six

papers were presented and discussed and about twelve or fifteen people participated in the seminar. Despite his unfamiliarity with the Queen's English (he kept risking his life there by calling the houses in Lancaster "cute"), Tony managed to present a paper and take excellent notes in order to report the proceedings to us. A copy of the program is attached to this newsletter and if anyone is particularly interested in receiving copies of any of the papers after reading the summaries, they should try writing to the authors:

- Denis MacEoin, Kings College, Cambridge University, Cambridge, UK
- Tony Lee, [Ed. personal address follows]
- Denise Mossop, (c/o Peter Smith)
- Peter Smith, [Ed. personal address follows]
- Harri Peltola, [Ed. personal address follows]

The first paper which Tony discussed was "The Shaykhi Reaction to Babism in the Early Period" by Denis MacEoin. Mr. MacEoin was not at Lancaster to personally present his 41 page document, but the paper was read and generated some discussion. The paper is concerned with the attitudes which certain Shaykhi leaders, particularly Haji Muhammad Karim Khan Kirmani, to the Bab and to the growth of His new religion. The principal argument of the paper was that the Babi Movement spread initially among the Shaykhi networks, shattering the unity of the Shaykhis and causing them to beome the most vigorous enemies of the new Faith. The Shaykhi opposition to the Bab provided the leaders of the school with a point of agreement with orthodox Shi'ih ulama. This point of common opposition to the Babi Faith was used by the Shaykhi leaders to reintegrate their school into mainstream Shi'ih Islam and repudiate many of the radical and distinctive teachings of Shaykh Ahmad [Ahsayi] and Siyyid Kazim [Rashti]. The paper also shed some new light on the Bab Himself and onto the Baha'i understanding of Babi history.

For example, MacEoin makes the point that the Bab did not claim to be the Return of the Hidden Imam until the time of his imprisonment in Mah-Ku [Ed. also Mahku] in 1847/48. He states that those Babis who met the Bab in Shiraz in May of 1844 and thereafter accepted Him as the representative or gate (bab) of the Imam, who would make things ready for the coming of the Imam. Of course, if this is so, it would have tremendous implications for what the Bab actually told Mulla Husayn on the night of His declaration and what Mulla Husayn was actually looking for when he came to Shiraz.

MacEoin develops his position by quoting from early works of the Bab in which he prays for the appearance of the Imam (or the promised Qa'im), He claims that the Qa'im has inspired his work, etc. One quote from the Sahifa-yi 'Adliyya of the Bab reads:

> The meaning and form of expression of all the verses which God hath caused to flow from my tongue are as utter nothingness when compared with a single letter of the Book of God (Qur'an) or the words of the people of the House of Purity (the Imam)

and again

> the words that have flowed forth from my tongue and pen…can never equal a single letter of the prayers of the People of Purity, for they dwell in the substance of the Will of God while all others are subject to the influences of their actions.

MacEoin claims that Nabil and other Babi and Baha'i chronicles have gone wrong by attributing the Bab's later claims to His initial meetings with Shaykhis. In the beginning, the Bab was believed to be *sent* by the Hidden Imam. This seems to have meant that He has a higher status than Siyyid Kazim or Shaykh Ahmad, but a lower status than the Imam himself. Nor, according to MacEoin did the Bab urge his followers to abandon the Shari'a, the Muslim laws and rituals. In this early period He specifically wrote to His followers that they must observe all of the externals of the Law.

Perhaps because of its uncommon theme, this paper generated much discussion among the study class members. Some felt that much of MacEoin's evidence could be interpreted in several ways. Perhaps the Bab had only veiled his real claims (perhaps made only verbally) by the use of vague and misleading language in his Writings. Another question asked was: If the Bab was only claiming to be the leader of the Shaykhi school, why was He imprisoned and regarded as so much more dangerous than the other Shaykhi leaders? Why were His followers persecuted?

One possible answer to this question is that the Bab, while not claiming to be the Qa'im Himself, did claim to be in communication with the Qa'im and thereby excited messianic expectations and demonstrations among the people. This may have caused His arrest. (It should also be remembered that the Shaykhi leaders became implacable enemies of the Bab and were largely responsible for his persecution, and finally, His execution.) In Shi'ih

doctrine the Hidden Imam is believed to be the ruler of the whole world. He is in hiding, but when He appears, He will take control of the political system of Iran and conquer all of the nations. Even today, the Constitution of Iran states that the Shah rules the nation on behalf of the Hidden Imam (and adds "May God hasten his cming!"). So, the claim to be the Hidden Imam, or even to be in direct communication with Him, is a highly political claim. If taken seriously, it would mean that the state would be delivered into the hands of the claimant.

Another complex question was raised: Do the Manifestations of God know from the beginning what the full degree of their Revelations are? Do they fully recognize from the first moment of their awareness their special station as Manifestations of God? Or, is the matter, perhaps, even unclear to them? In other words, is it possible that the Bab (or Baha'u'llah, or Muhammad, or Jesus for that matter) did not claim their full stations at first because they were not fully aware of their station at first?

One member of the class approached these questions from a broad philosophical perspective. He suggested it is natural for human beings to want to see things in an easy categorical terms. The history of religion especially seems to be the history of people jumping to conclusions and reading the present back into the past. The Guardian has stated that religious truth is "relative, not absolute". This statement applies not only between religions, but also within a particular dispensation. We know that the principle of progressive revelation applies to each dispensation as well as to the history of religions. (Cf., the Introduction of the House of Justice to the Synopsis and Codification of the Kitab-i-Aqdas) Perhaps there is also a kind of progressive revelation that occurs in the lives of the Prophets Themselves before the full plentitude of their powers are revealed to them. Perhaps this unfolding is simply the way human beings are prepared by Divine forces for the full impact of a Revelation.

Since Tony Lee had presented his paper on the Baha'i community of Ishqabad to this class earlier in the year, we skipped discussion of his paper and went on to Denise Mossop's paper on Baha'i Mysticism. (See program.) The paper which Ms. Mossop read at Lancaster was a composite of excerpts from her senior thesis at that university. It received a rather cool response. Though she is English, Ms. Mosop was a Muslim, on her way to becoming a Sufi, when she heard about the Baha'i Faith and embraced it.

The paper compared the Baha'i teachings with Sufi mysticism on one hand, and the formal legalistic tradition of Islam, on the other. The thesis was that the Baha'i Faith establishes a middle ground between an individual mystic experience and a community-oriented, external religious practice. It is a balanced compromise between the two traditions found in Islam. The major question raised at Lancaster concerned the definition of mysticism. The paper never gives an adequate definition, and neither did the participants in the conference. Therefore, no one was quite sure what Baha'i mysticism might be, if indeed it exists at all. One class member observed that since Ms. Mossop does not speak Arabic or Persian, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for her to compare the Baha'i Writings to those of Sufi mystics.

The next paper discussed was that of Moojan Momen — "Early Contacts Between Baha'is and Christian Missionaries in Persia". The paper was based on research done in English archives of certain missionary societies which sent workers to Iran in the mid-nineteenth century. It was presented to the seminar in rough, unfinished form, without footnotes. This paper and the one presented by Peter Smith were both drafts of papers which will appear in a forthcoming publication edited by Moojan Momen, entitled Studies in Baha'i History, to be published by George Ronald in England.

Momen's paper brought to light a number of previously unkonw contacts between missionaries and Babis/Baha'is in the period between 1844 and about 1910. The paper was primarily concerned with English missionaries and their encounters with the Faith, but also included some closing notes on American missionaries. Both sets of missionaries initially reacted with enthusiasm to their discovery of Babis or Baha'is. They saw them as a liberal group, liberated from Muslim superstition and ripe for conversion to Christianity. They hoped that the Babi Faith would provide their opening to the eventual evangelization of all of Iran.

Momen was able to uncover one fascinating incident in which a number of Babis (Azalis) in Isfahan pretended to convert to Christianity in 1871. Rev. Robert Bruce, the missionary who presided over these conversions, sent enthusiastic reports home. However, he was soon to be disappointed when it became clear that these conversions were a result of a major famine which was killing thousands in Iran. Since the missionaries had ready access to famine relief funds, it is not surprising that a few individuals should be willing to come to Bruce and express an interest in Christianity and even pretend to be converted.

Momen writes: “This episode is of great interest since Bruce’s reports shed some light on the state of the Babi community in what can perhaps be termed the Dark Age of Babi-Baha’i history. By that appelation is meant that there is a period from 1852 until about 1875, for which there is a great dearth of source materials that shed light on what was happenign to the Babi community in Persia during this crucial phase of its development, when, bit by bit it was being transformed into the Baha’i community.” Bruce reports a great deal of fragmentation among Babis. There were at least three different groups of Babi/Baha’is in Isfahan during this period — all antagonistic to one another.

Another account from Barfurush (now Babul) in 1852 demonstrates the disorganization of the Babis and their bitterness towards Islam. A missionary relates that he met some Muslims in the street who asked for some Christian tracts against Islam. He asked why, to which they replied:

> “Because we detest Mohamed, and ridicule his Koran.” During the short conversation which I had with them in the street, I learnt they were secret followers of the Bab, the renowned Persian socialist, whose community two years ago menaced both the religion and throne of Persia…. I informed my aquaintances in the street, that I should be happy to see them in the caravanserai, but they were afraid to see me, for fear of exciting suspicion. One of them, who from his white turban appeared to be a mullan, ‘Inshallah,’ (ie please God,) ‘we shall yet drive Mohamed, Ali, and all the Imams from Persia; and whether we become Ingleese, or Russ(ian), (meaning Christians of either Churches) is to us a matter of indifference, since all creeds are better than that of the Arabian robber.”

The missionary left their company quickly, feeling that their language was too violent and their hatred of Islam too bitter to continue the conversation in a public thoroughfare.

This quotation excited some discussion in the class. One person felt that it was quite odd to find Babis attacking Muhammad and Islam. Though they may be bitter towards Muslims, (this was a year of major persecution against Babis in Iran) they should not have attacked the Prophet. He wondered if the Babis had not tailored their remarks for the missionary, pretending to hate Islam in order to gain his attention and favor. It is also possible that the missionary misunderstood what the Babis were actually saying and took their disaffection from Islam as an attack on the person of Muhammad and the Koran.

Others felt that there was no reason to make these assumptions, but that the incident could be taken at face value. If so, it is a valuable indication of the nature of the Babi community during this period — confused, frightened and antagonistic to Islam.

Of course, the relationship between Baha'is and missionaries eventually turned sour as the Christians realized that the Faith would not be a rich source of converts and even threatened to be the greatest rival in the field of conversion. By the turn of the century, English missionaries were writings tracts in Persian against the Faith. Within a few years initial cordial relations were cut off completely.

American missionaries in the north of Iran followed a similar pattern of interest, disillusionment and then antagonism towards the Baha'is, but here the final break was a much more dramatic and bitter affair. Several missionaries printed articles in English journals highly critical of the Baha'i Faith. Rev. S. O. Wilson of the Tabriz mission finally published Baha'ism and its Claims, the first full volume written in a European language attacking the Faith. This was followed by other works of similar nature. It is interesting that the only serious, full-scale attacks on the Faith in the West have been written by former-missionaries to Iran. (This includes Miller's latest volume, The Baha'i Faith: Its History and Teachings.) This is the primary fruit of this early Christian-Baha'i interaction.

One criticism of Momen's paper was that he presented the missionaries as the active element and the Baha'is as a passive element in their encounters. While he is careful to explain the motives of the missionaries and the factors which attracted them to the Baha'i community, he fails to provide similar explanations for why Baha'is may have been attracted to missionaries. This is, of course, partially a result of the sources used (ie missionary records). Yet, even here there are some hints. The French consul at Tabriz reported in 1910 that disturbances had broken out in Urniyyih [sic] because the missionaries there had hired a Baha'i to teach Persian in their school. He took the opportunity to convert every one of hsi students to the Baha'i Faith! He was dismissed and the missionaries were asking that he be expelled from the town. (Smile.)

The next paper discussed was that of Harri Peltola, "The History of the Baha'i Faith in Finland: A Case Study in the Sociology of Counterculture." Although the paper was written in Finnish, Mr. Peltola gave highlights of the paper in English. He began with a long, theoretical introduction on the definition of counterculture and the nature of this

phenomenon. Unfortunately, this analysis was then dropped and he began recounting the history of the Faith in Finland without ever integrating these two sections of the paper.

The history of the Faith began in Finland in 1933 when Martha Root gave a talk there in Esperanto. However, the Faith had been mentioned in print in Finland as early as 1897. The first Baha'i moved to Finland in 1938 from the U.S. and converted the first believer, a young priest, to the Faith the same year. But, by 1952 there were still only 8 Baha'is in the whole country. They were all (it seems) from theosophical or metaphysical backgrounds and saw the Faith as a 'society' to which they belonged… (in Peltola's own words) a kind of hobby.

In 1958, the Hands of the Cause in the Holy Land recommended to the Baha'is in Finland that they sever their church affiliations. However, this was only a suggestion and many chose not to follow this advice. In 1962, there being now 80 Baha'is in the country, the government afforded full recognition to the Faith. This recognition obliged the believers to leave their churches and register as Baha'is. Some refused to do so and left the Faith.

By 1969 there were 120 Baha'is in Finland, but still no youth. The greatest growth in the Faith took place in the years between 1970 and 1973, when scores of young people became Baha'is (perhaps because they saw the Baha'i Faith as a counterculture). There are now about 250 Baha'is in the country. Sadly, many of the young converts to the Faith have gotten lost.

Peltola reported that in 1962 a Finnish priest wrote a full volume book attacking the Faith. The book has recently been reprinted. This is pretty amazing considering the number of Baha'is in the country and the fact that Finnish is not a very popular language. Someone in Finland must see the Faith as a big threat.

The final paper discussed was by Peter Smith, "The American Baha'i Community, 1896-1925: Emergence from a Cultic Melieu." Peter himself has summarized the argument of his paper in a recent report on the conference as follows"

> Peter Smith (Lancaster) in a paper entitled, "The American Baha'i Community, 1896-1925: Emergence from a Cultic Melieu", sought to identify the main themes in early American Baha'i history, giving particular attention to questions of authority. Part of the paper consisted of a description of the gradual emergence of a national administrative structure, centering on the

> Baha'i Temple Unity. It was argued that as many early American Baha'is came from a particular religious background (the Metaphysical movement) which inclined them towards suspicion of "organization", tentions were engendered within the American Baha'i community by this emerging administration. These tensions came to a head at the time of the First World War, after which there was a gerater acceptance of organizational forms which presaged later developments during the period of the Guardianship and which marked the American Baha'i community's emergence from the cultic melieu.

Peter Smith is a graduate student at the University of Lancaster working on a doctorate in sociology. The topic of his dissertation will be on the sociological development of the Baha'i Faith. (Apparently, he intends to take on the whole thing.) He has done research in the Baha'i National Archives of Canada, the United States and Great Britain. His paper was based on his research in Wilmetter.

Smith's paper implicitely attacked the widespread notion that the American Baha'i Community was, during the time of Abdu'l-Baha, a loose, unstructured and unorganized group which only took on shape and organizational form during the ministry of Shoghi Effendi with the rise of the Administrative Order. The paper demonstrated that from the early days of the Faith in America there have always been two tendencies in the community: one towards organization and structure, the other towards spiritual speculation and lack of structure. During Abdu'l-Baha'is time, these two factions of the Baha'i community sometiems took each other on in full battle.

Smith's paper was fascinating in the light which was able to throw on the nature of the Baha'i community before 1925. The most striking feature of that community, for the modern Baha'i at least, is its unrelieved factionalism. Each city would have not one Baha'i group, or even two, but five or six mutually antagonistic groups all calling themselves Baha'is. This might include groups of Covenant-breakers and Baha'is who followed different teachers. Often the women would have a group of their own, though it is usually centered around a male figure. In Chicago, for instance, there was established the House of Spirituality (that is, the Spiritual Assembly) to which only men could be elected; and then, there was the Women's Assembly of Teaching. These two bodies were not always on the best of terms. In light of these kinds of divisions, Abdu'l-Baha's constant exhortations tothe community for unity take on new meaning.

Smith noted that before the Faith was established in America it had not attracted any substantial number of believers from a Christian background and remained essentially a phenomenon within Persian Shi'ih Islam. It was this initial period of growth outside of the Faith's original Islamic melieu which established the breadth of its appeal and its ability to adapt to alien religious traditions. What we have in the West is, in some sense, our own 'home grown' variety of the Faith.

Peter Smith has summarized some of the common themes found in the historical papers presented at the Lancaster Conference as follows:

> The historical papers ranged considerably in time and locale… A common theme which might be discerned in mos tof the historical papers is the way in which Babi and Bah'ai communities have evolved into relative independence from various milieu: from a movement within Shaykhism to an independent religious community bitterly condemned by the new Shaykhi leadership; from a de facto part of a newly established Persian Shi'a community in Ishqabad to an independent religious community officially recognized by the government and possessing its own distinctive institutions; from a loosely organized part of the "cultic milieu" of early twentieth century America, to a more tightly organized community with a stronger sense of its separate identity and mission; and from an individualistic "Baha'i Society" whose members retained nominal membership in the state church, to an independent religious community officially recognized by the Finnish authorities. In two of these cases (Lee, Peltola) government recognition has been an important feature in this evolutionary process, whilst in the Babi case governmental and clerical opposition was a major factor; in two cases (MacEoin, Smith) internal tensions within the community contributed significantly, and in the Ishqabad, American and Finnish examples external directives from central Baha'i authorities were important.

The study class went on to discuss other general concerns which were raised at the Lancaster Conference. These included the question of the role of faith in the academic study of the Baha'i Faith. What assumptions, if any should the Baha'i make as he approaches a serious study of the Faith from an academic point of view? The importance of this kind of study of the Faith was also discussed. At this point in Baha'i history, is it just a

luxury or does it have an important role to play in the Baha'i Community. Unfortunately, spce does not allow a summary of these discussions.

BAHA'I STUDIES SEMINAR

Saturday, 15th and Sunday, 16th April, 1978

PROGRAMME

All sessions will be held in Room B65, Sociology Department, Cartmel College, University of Lancaster.

Saturday, 15th April

11:00 – 12:15 Denis MacEoin (Cambridge)
"The Shaykhi reaction to Babism in the early period".

12:15 – 2:00 Lunch

2:00 – 3:15 Tony Lee (Los Angeles)
"The Baha'i community of Ishqabad, Russian Turkistan".

3:15 – 3:45 Tea

3:45 – 5:00 Denise Mossop (Lancaster)
"The mediatory role of Baha'i: a comparison of Sufi and Baha'i mysticism".

5:00 – 6:00 General discussion of the three papers.

Sunday, 16th April

10:00 – 11:15 Moojan Momen (Cambridge)
"Early contacts between Baha'is and Christian missionaries".

11:15 – 11:45 Coffee

11:45 – 1:00 Peter Smith (Lancaster)
"The American Baha'i community, 1894-1925″.

1:00 – 2:00 Lunch

2:30 – 3:45 Harri Peltola (Helsinki)
“The history of the Baha’i Faith in Finland: a case study in the sociology of counterculture”

3:45 – 4:15 Tea

4:15 – 5:30 Discussion of last three papers.

5:30 – 6:30 “Baha’i Studies” – general discussion

Peter Smith
Department of Sociology
University of Lancaster

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Related Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#3]

My Notes:In this newsletter the class discusses an article by Denis MacEoin, a brilliant Baha’i scholar who is no longer a member of the Baha’i community. The story of how MacEoin was marginalized, harassed and pushed out of the community is a very interesting one – one of the quintessential examples of objective scholarship battling fundamentalist dogma in recent Baha’i history. However, I won’t attempt to do it justice in this post. Let’s just leave it by saying that the Baha’i community and Babi/Baha’i scholarship lost a brilliant star when they lost MacEoin. Thankfully, we still have many of his works and articles (such as the one being discussed below).

Before proceeding you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]

[Ed. home address and phone number]
December 5th, 1976

Dear Baha'i Friends,

On November 27th, a few Baha'is gathered for the third session of the new class. (Will someone please suggest a proper name for it.) The competition of the holiday weekend unfortunately kept attendance to a minimum. Shahin Carrigan was again unable to be present, so the formal part of our discussion dealt only with the World Order article which was suggested last time.

(Corrections to previous letters:

Anthony Lee [Ed. home phone number]
John Hendershot

The last meeting was held on November 13th, not November 30th.)

(The following persons have been added to our mailing list:

Donald and Susan Berkman [Ed. home phone numbers and addresses follow for each]
George Dahl
Blanche Grent
Robert Gundry
Lorraine Johnson
Manila Lee
Denis MacEoin
Aurora Ragston
Hamid Rastegar [Ed. surname difficult to read]
Greg and Pam Wahlstrom)

(Copies of previous newsletters were also sent to Denis MacEoin informing him of our plans to discuss his article and inviting his comments.)

(A copy of this summary is also being sent to World Order magazine for possible publication of excerpts in "Interchange", the section devoted to letters to the editor.)

The group dived headlong into a discussion of the article entitled “The Concept of the Nation in Islam”, by Denis MacEoin (World Order 10 1976 #4 pp. 7-21). The article took some heavy critisicm. (Since this letter is being sent to Mr. MacEoin, he will, atleast have a chance to reply. Any communication received from him will be duplicated and sent to everyone, that is, if he does not object.)

There was agreement that Mr. MacEoin had a difficult time getting a hold of his topic. Some felt that this was because the topic was hopelessly broad, while others seemed to think that it was excessively narrow, atleast in the way that it was defined. Someone suggested that the article may have been “mistitled”. Mr. MacEoin was certainly more interested in the concept of the nation in Europe than he was in the concept of the nation in Islam.

However, the point of the article seems to be to lend scholarly support to the idea that Islam is the ultimate source of the rise of nationalism in Europe. If this is the case, then a minimum requirement would be for Mr. MacEoin to demonstrate some historical connection between the concept of nationhood in Islam (that is, the idea of ‘umma) and the European ideas of nationalism. This he utterly fails to do. Indeed, the failure is admitted in a footnote on the first page of the article. This admission leaves the reader wondering what point, if any, Mr. MacEoin is trying to make.

A second, perhaps more important point was made. That is that the quotations from Shoghi Effendi which are cited in the beginning of the article do not say what Mr. MacEoin seems to think that they say. He indicates [Ed. word is misspelled as indicarads] that the quotations require a Baha’i to believe that European nationalism (that is, the modern, popular and secular nationalism which we know today) was introduced to the world by Muhammad and had its beginning in Islam. Most of those present vigorously disagreed with this interpretation. One person noted that Shoghi Effendi uses the word “nation”, “nationality” and “nationhood” and seems to deliberately avoid the term “nationalism” which, atleast in its modern form, is a different thing altogether. Someone noted that even MacEoin himself admits that popular, political and secular nationalism did not rise in its glory until 1789 with the French Revolution. He argued that a better date might be 1848, with the popular Revolutions of that year, putting nationalism (as we know it) squarely within the Baha’i Dispensation. Indeed, it is very curious, if not incredible, that nationalism, which is clearly a nineteenth-century phenomenon, should be attributed to

anything which Muhammad did in the seventh century. Surely, only a Baha'i would be convinced by such an odd historical argument, and the Baha'is who were present at the class certainly were not.

Furthermore, Shoghi Effendi has strongly condemned modern nationalism in his writings (e.g. The Promised Day is Come pp.117-118) as a "false god". It seems strange that we should attribute the rise of this evil to a Manifestation of God! Rather, we should understand the "nation" that Muhammad brought as just that unity of believers in a social community, owing common allegiance to the Prophet and the Law of God, and respecting each other as brothers in Faith, regardless of differences which MacEoin so able explains on pp.16-18 of his article. That this Divine Order had anything to do (in any more than a marginal way) with the grotesque monstrosity of modern, militaristic and god-less which we know today, is highly unlikely.

So why does Mr. MacEoin feel constrained to make such a connection? Especially in light of the weakness and scarcity of the quotations from the Baha'i Writings (which even, perhaps, wrongly) may be cited to support this view? The answer is simple. A common piece of misinformation at firesides is that Muhammad brought the nation-state as we know it today. Being aware that nationalism actually developed in Europe and not in the Islamic world, he felt constrained to resolve this contradiction. Since he was unable to trace connections between the idea of 'umma and the idea of secular nationalism, he was forced to spin out the elaborate and convoluted argument which his article presents. We may be thankful that Mr. MacEoin is an Islamic scholar, and not a student of the Classics. Imagine trying to trace the city-state to Jesus and his teachings!! Both examples, illustrate the danger of taking "fireside information" at face value.

How much simpler to return to the original quotations; read them with a little more care; redefine"nation" and "nationhood" (separating it from "nationalism"); and then let it go at that. Perhaps, Mr. MacEoin will consider this alternative.

After discussing this article, the group turned to other topics, which space will not allow me to summarize here. Let it be said though that some found the free discussion much more interesting than the above. The NEXT MEETING will be on Saturday, December 11th at the home of Mehrdad Amanat [Ed. home address follows]. Same place as last time. Subject: the position of women in the Kitab-i-Aqdas. EVERYONE WILL BE EXPECTED TO HAVE READ THE INTRODUCTION TO THE SYNOPSIS AND CODIFICATION

WRITTEN BY THE HOUSE OF JUSTICE, and the sections of the Synopsis of Marriage and Inheritance.

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Links:
The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#4]

SKIP TO NEWSLETTER

My Notes:

In this edition of the newsletter the class discusses the Kitab-i-Aqdas, the Baha'i Faith's "Mother Book" and the Book of Laws. This was before the completion of the official translation and publication of the Most Holy Book under the auspices of the Universal House of Justice in 1992. So the Baha'is of that time only had access to the "Synopsis and Codification of the Laws and Ordinances of the Kitab-i-Aqdas" (published in 1973) as an official, but incomplete translation, and to the unofficial but complete translation of Miller/Elder. The class, specifically, discusses the charge that the Baha'i Faith (and/or the Kitab-i-Aqdas is 'sexist'). This is a pretty hot button issue, even today among Baha'is and I am, yet again delighted that the class goes about knocking over one taboo subject after another.

They then go on to discuss an issue which is arguably the most contentious one in recent Baha'i history: women's exclusion from serving on the House of Justice. The class barely scratches the surface on this topic and for those who are interested in further material, this might be of interest. There is also a plethora of discussions on this topic in various Baha'i discussion forums.

As well, a great deal of the newsletter is taken up by the exuberant reply from MacEoin to the criticisms levelled at his article in the previous class' newsletter.

Before proceeding, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]

Notes from the Baha'i study group (assemblage? class?), (we never did settle on a formal name) from the meeting of Dec 11, 1976, in Merdat Amanat's [Ed. correct name is Mehrdad Amanat] apartment (sorry about the spelling on the names) . Those who attended were: Tony Lee (enfant terrible and ringleader), Mehrdat Amanat (did I get it right that time?), Greg and Paula Wahlstrom, Bob Ballenger (secretary and scapegoat) and, truckin' a bit late, Don and Susan Berkman.

Shahin Carrigan didn't make it (again), so no presentation on "value free science."

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Organizational trivia dept. : at Tony's suggestion, we decided that the notes for these letters should be taken by one person in attendance, on a rotating basis. Since Bob Ballenger couldn't think of an excuse not to do it fast enough, he wrote this mishmash. Lawsuits for the contents may be directed to the firm Quimby, Eggplant and Frebish.

The topic for the class was a critical analysis of the Kitab-i-Aqdas, with particular attention to seeming sexism [in] the language of the text. As it happens, there is a complete translation of the Aqdas available. The slim red volume most Baha'is are familiar with is a synopsis with only a fragmentary made of the Book's passages. However, two Christian missionaries, William Miller and Earl Elder got their hands on an authentic copy of the text and they translated it in a rathe awkward rendition freighted down with a wooden style. Still, it provides the reader with a more complete idea of what Baha'u'llah had in mind when He wrote the Book in 1873.

Our discussion of the Aqdas (based on the Baha'i version, which we used) let us to conclude that Baha'u'llah wrote what amounts to an outline of Baha'i law, not a legal text in the codified form. The Aqdas is not a narrative. The text frequently jumps from subject to subject. Sometimes, it seems as if virtually every line in some passage in on a different topic. Our review of the book was hampered by the fact that those related works such as "Questions and Answers" which Baha'u'llah intended as a supplement to the Aqdas, and the various tablets He later revealed, also modifying or clarifying passages in the Aqdas, were not available to us.

Even a cursory reading of the text reveals it to be eliptical and, members of the class agreed, theBook poses a puzzle to the Baha'is who must now live with it. As these discussions go, there was considerable digression into side issues, but we managed to explore these as they arose with dispatch and returned to the business at hand pretty well.

Some things did emerge from the discussion. For instance, it was proposed that, because Baha'u'llah placed more emphasis on male roles (viz. inheritance laws) He evidently intended that men continue to be the primary supporters of their families. Still this did not resolve the seeming ambiguities in the Aqdas that we discovered. Such resolution will have to come at some later date.

As is almost inevitable in discussions such as the one we had, the fact that women can not serve on the UHJ was trotted out thrashed about. There is no doubt about this, by the way. In the text of the Aqdas, Baha'u'llah addresses the members of the Universal House as "men of justice". No one apparently knows why women are thereby apparently excluded from membership, but its a fact of Baha'i administrative life that they are. We discussed this point at some length. It was noted that women are not precluded from administrative service. They regularly are elected to various local and national assemblies. So if women were (for some reason) to be excluded from administrative responsability, it seems logical Baha'u'llah would have taken care to do so all the way down the line…and didn't. Although there was no concensus on this next point, it was worth noting that it was suggested there is nothing peculiar about women that causes their exclusion on the UHJ. Rather, what appears to be the case is that the special nature of the Universal House somehow precludes women from serving on its membership. So, in essence, the reason is not a sexist one, but has some other basis in being. (Incidentally, in that regard, it was pointed out that even if the reason for the exclusion of women from membership on the House, and their seeming second class treatment with regard to inheritance, for example, were sexist, that's just too bad. Baha'u'llah, specifically warns those who read the text to "Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring balance established amongst men." Sexism and our contemporary concern with it, it could be argued, is just such a "current standard" that simply is in error.)

More speculation. One theory offered up (on the condition the author of it remain nameless; we'll call the person Deep Vote) suggest that the exclusion of women from

House membership does not involve any alleged inferiority on their part. As the theory goes, members of the House must work closely and intensely together, sometimes for extended periods of time. Men and women under such conditions, might arouse suspicions (on the part of non-Baha'is) of possible hanky-panky. Since the UHJ is the supreme Baha'i administrative institution, there must never be a hint or suspicion about impropriety among its members. Therefore, to avoid giving rise to such suspicions, women are excluded. (To which, it might be argued, why not exclude men? To which it can be replied that, in the current state of the unliberated world, women in certain lands would find it impossible to serve on the House.And so it goes.)

Probably the best refutation that the Baha'i Faith is secretly sexist, is its own history. After all Tahirih played a major role in the Babi Dispensation and is considered a Baha'i (well, Babi) heroine. Also, when Abdu'l-Baha came to Europe, and America, He called the equality of men and women one of the most important Baha'i principles. Now, He was not indulging in press agentry or misrepresentation when he did so. When Abdu'l-Baha left the Holy Land on his western trips, He left His sister, the Greatest Holy Leaf, in charge of the whole shooting match. All questions relating to the Faith, all administrative functions, and running the Baha'i household — everything was up to her. She was the de facto head of the Faith while Abdu'l-Baha was away. Early in his own ministry, Shoghi Effendi also put the Greatest Holy Leaf in charge on atleast two occasions when he went to Europe in the 1920s. Again, if women were, in the Baha'i view, somehow inferior, this wouldn't have happened.

Okay. This (too long) sample is to give those who didn't make it some idea of what went on. The classes tend to be discursive but informative. Besides, where else can you sit around and talk (seriously) about the Baha'i Faith without winding up stuck in the muck of fireside misinformation?

Next class will deal with the myths and rituals of the Baha'i Faith. (Funny, don't they always say at firesides that we have no myths, no dogma, no ritual?) The class will be held at 2 pm Sunday, Dec. 19 at the spacious apartment of Mehrdad Amanat, [Ed. address follows]. From there, we adjourn to the new Idi Amin Hotel in downtown Botswana for tea.

[Ed. handwritten note reads:]

Editor's Note: Susan Berkman will read a paper on the topic of "Myth & Ritual in the Baha'i Faith" at the next class. It promises to be most stimulating.

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[Ed. the following is from Denis MacEoin in reply to the discussion and critique of his article]

[Ed. illegible title heading but most probably it is the tile of article being discussed"The Concept of Nation in Islam"]

In reply to certain objections raised at a seminar held in Los Angeles on November 27, 1976.

I must thank these friends who took part in the above seminar, not only for having had interest and patience to discuss my article, but for having given me this opportunity to reply to the criticisms which were raised regarding certain aspects of it. Perhaps I shall be able, in the course of this reply, to clarify some of the statements which became the subject of criticism and thereby make possible a deeper understanding of the subject as a whole.

[Ed. illegible word] I begin by remarking that I felt that much of the criticism was unjustified seemed to result from a very superficial reading of the article. In particular – as I shall show in more detail later – the introduction of the red herring, of 'nationalism' led the seminar into areas of discussion quite removed from the initial argument of my article and resulted in a very serious misunderstanding of what I was trying to say.

The first criticism made was that the article was either hopelessly broad or hopelessly narrow – perhaps the very fact that such an extreme range of views existed on this point is evident that the article was somewhere in between these two extremes. More serious criticism was that the article was mistitled and that I was more interested in showing the concept of nation in Europe than in Islam. It seems quite obvious to me that whoever made this suggestion had not read the article at all [Ed. the following word is difficult to read and may be another] clearly; the whole point of the article was to demonstrate that it was in Europe and not in the Islamic world that the first nation states arose. In the last paragraph, I wrote: "It would seem, therefore, that in direct terms, that the Mission of Muhammad was frustrated within Islam itself… If, as we have tried to show, the purpose of God was brought to a satisfactory resolution in the emergence of nations in Europe. It is this

interaction between the religions and cultures of Islam and Christianity which constitutes the most remarkable feature of the Dispensation preceeding the Baha'i Dispensation" The reason for the title is really very simple – it is intended to draw attention to the common misconception among Baha'is that, in simple and literal terms, Islam brought the nation state to the world; I began with the statement of Shoghi Effendi that "the Faith of Islam … introduced … the conception of the nation as a unit and a vital stage in the organization of human society, and embodied it in its teaching" and went on went on to try to reconcile this statement with observable historical facts about the rise of nations. This necessarily meant dwelling to some extent on the development of the European nation-state, but it is simply not true to say that I was 'more interested in the concept of the nation in Europe than … in Islam' – please simply count the number of pages devoted to each topic.

Another criticism is that, having put forward the hypothesis that 'Islam is the ultimate source of nationalism in Europe', I should, as a minimum requirement 'demonstrate some historical connection between the concept of nationhood in Islam …and the European idea of nationalism'. This you say, I 'utterly failt to do', and since I myself admit this failure , you ask what point if any, I was trying to make. This is an exceptionally unfair criticism; it is up to the reader to discover what point I am trying to make rather than to first decide for himself what point I should have been trying to make and then condemn me for not having made it. The demonstration of that historical connection is nowhere said by me to be the purpose of the article; it is, as you say, in my so-called admission of failure, nothing more than a theme, on which it would be useful to elaborate. I am not even convinced that there is a direct connection between the 'umma concept and the European political thought, and I clearly say so. What I do believe is that there was a direct influence by the Islamic world on Europe, both in the Carelingian [Ed. previous word is difficult to make out] period and in the Middle Ages, and I feel that I have presented a reasonable amount of evidence such influence existed. To be more precise, I have tried to show that there was some sort of interaction between Islam and Christendom which brought mankind, by the nineteenth century to the point where nation states could become the universal political unit in readiness for the next stage of political development, that of world unification. If I have to some extent, succeeded in this effort, I can hardly be attacked for not having achieved what someone else thinks I should have done.

Your next criticism is both the most important and, if I may say so, the least justified. You say that I indicate that the quotations I cite from Shoghi Effendi require us to believe 'that

European nationalism (that is the modern, popular, and secular nationalism which we know today) was introduced by Muhammad and its beginnings in Islam'. I am glad to see that most of those present disagreed with this interpretation, since it is your own interpretation and is nowhere made or suggested by me. It seems to me that the bulk of your criticism consists in putting words into my mouth and then attacking me for having said them. This is not only unscholarly, it is impertinent. To begin with, the definition of nationalism given here ('modern, popular and secular', and below 'modern, militaristic and god-less') is yours and not mine. For this reason alone, the whole argument presented by your group here falls down completely inasmuch as it is in no way related to the concept which I actually discuss. Again, the suggestion that this nationalism 'was introduced by Muhammad and had its beginnings in Islam' is entirely yours; I have gone to pains in my article to show precisely that the form of nation-state introduced by Muhammad very quickly vanished from Islam and that the modern concept of the nation does not have its beginnings in Islam; as I state on page 15 of the article '… after the death of Muhammad, we are faced not with the development of 'umma but with the creation of an empire, and again (on page 19); 'Something clearly went wrong with Islam …'. You go on to say that I attribute the rise of the 'evil' of modern nationalism to a Manifestation of God (i.e. Muhammad); I would appreciate it if you could possibly tell me exactly where I have made such an attribution.

More serious, perhaps, than your mistaken allegation that the concept of which I was was concerned in my article, was nationalism in the bad sense, is your confident assertion that Shoghi Effendi speaks only disparagingly about nationalism. On the contrary, he clearly distinguishes between false and true nationalism, between the harmful 'philosophy of nationalism' on the one hand and the reality of the genuine nation states on the other. He writes: "The love of one's country instilled and stressed in the teachings of Islam, as 'an element of the Faith of God', has not, through this declation, this clarion call of Baha'u'llah, been either condemned or disparaged. It should not, indeed, it can not be construed as a repudiation, or regarded in the light of censure pronounced against, a sane and intelligent patriotism, nor does it seek to undermine the allegiance and loyalty of any individual in his country, nor does it conflict with the legitimate aspirations, rights, and duties of any individual state or nation" (Promised Day Is Come pp. 126-127). Again, "let there be no misgivings as to the animating purpose of the world-wide Law of Baha'u'llah. … its purpose is neither to stifle a sane and intelligent patriotism in men's heart, nor to abolish the system of national autonomy so essential if the evils of excessive centralization

are to be avoided. It does not ignore, nor does it attempt to supress, the diversity of ethnical origins, of climate, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit, that differentiate the peoples of the world (World Order of Baha'u'llah p.41).

That the national concept, in the modern sense, is regarded by Shoghi Effendi as the stage of social organization immediately prerequisite to and absolutely essential for the unification of mankind in a federated world state is made abundantly clear by him in many places. He writes: "To the states and principalities from the welter of the great Napoleonic upheaval, whose chief preoccupation was either to recover their rights to an independant existence or to achieve their national unity, the conception of world solidarity seemed not only remote but inconceivable. It was not until the forces of nationalism had succeeded in overthrowing the foundation of the Holy Alliance that had sought to curb their rising power, that the possibility of a world order, transcending in its range the political institutions these nations had established, came to be seriously entertained" (World Order of Baha'u'llah p.44). Again: "Unification of the whole of mankind is the hallmark of the stage which human society is now approaching. Unity of family, of tribe, of city state, and nation have been successively attempted and fully established. World unity is the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving. Nation-building has come to an end" (World Order of Baha'u'llah p.202). That it is to the essentially European concept and fact of nationhood that Shoghi [Effendi] is referring is made abundantly clear by him in a passage quoted by me in my article, where he states: "The conception of nationality, the attainment to the state of nationhood, may, therefore, be said to be the distinguishing characteristic of the Muhammadan Dispensation, in the course of which the nations and races of the world, and particularly in Europe and America, were unified and achieved political independance" (Promised Day Is Come p. 125). Perhaps you could tell me in what respect my argument differs from that outlined by the Guardian in the above sentence? That this, and not some rediculous attempt – such as you attribute to me – that modern nationalism in its most exaggerated form had originated in Islam, was what I set out to demonstrate in my essay was made even clearer by me by my quoting the second part of that sentence a second time (p.12). I would suggest that you read again, and this time with more care, the second paragraph on page 12. The simple fact is that the modern nation state does form the basic building block from which a federated world system will be constructed, just as individual states of North America formed the units out of which the Unites States came into being; it is also a fact that these nation states came into being within the period of the Islamic Dispensation; it is also a fact that Baha'is believe that

everything during the Dispensation of a Manifestation has its origin in the creative forces released by Him and can ultimately be traced back to His influence; it is also a fact that Shoghi Effendi, as quoted above, explicitly attributes the rise of national states to the influence of Muhammad. To drag the debased and corrupt forms of modern nationalism which have been developed during the Baha'i Dispensation (because the nation concept is now outgrown) into this argument is completely out of place and utterly unwarranted. Modern nationalism is nothing but a corrupt expression of a valid concept; it has nothing to do with the matter under consideration.

You even go so far as to say that I was misled by false 'fireside information' in preparing my article, when it should be abundantly clear to anyone reading the article with a minimum of attention that it is precisely in order to dispel the absurd fireside myth that the nation actually within Islam itself, that the article has been written. May I, therefore, end here, by requessing all of you to take the advice given to me towards the end of your reply and read again the quotations from the Guardian which I have given in my article and above, and to try to grasp the fairly obvious points made in them. I would also recommend that each of you read, once again, the article itself and attempt to understand what I'm actually saying rather than making completely unfounded allegations about what you thought I was saying. It may be that I was not sufficiently clear about my arguments in the original, but I hope that this reply will make them clearer and make it possible for you to have a more constructive discussion on what I believe to be important concepts deserving of some attention.

May I thank you all once again for your kindness in allowing me to thus reply to you criticisms; I do look forward to hearing more of the activities of your group and wish you all every success in the study of the deeper implication of the Baha'i revelation.

With warmest love,

Denis MacEoin

[END DOCUMENT]

Links:
The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#5]

My Notes:The fifth newsletter deals with a very interesting topic – one that many Baha'is emphatically insist does not even exist in the Faith: ritual.

In fact, the Baha'i Faith does have rituals (so does the Babi Faith, by the way). But we are given the guidance to not revel in them or to allow them to confine or confuse our devotion to God. I suspect this is a warning to not fall prey to the previous mistake of humanity in losing sight of God for the trappings and ceremonies around His worship. As Bruce Lee instructs his young pupil in Enter the Dragon: Do not concentrate on the finger pointing to the moon, or you will miss all that heavenly glory.

Having been inspired by the classes treatment of ritual in the Baha'i Faith, I decided to see how many I could come up with. The most obvious one is the 19 day feast which is held every, er, nineteen days and is divided into three sections (devotional, social and administrative). Another obvious one is the annual fast, and another is the ritual surrounding the daily obligatory prayer which must be recited by every Baha'i at specific times during each day. As well, depending on which of the three is recited, it may involve ablutions (the ritualistic washing of hands and face while reciting verses) and repetitive motions (standing up, bowing down, etc.). A person must be facing the Qiblih, no matter which of the three obligatory prayers is recited.

Some other rituals not so obvious are marriage related. The time limit between engagement and marriage, the verse to be recited by man and woman in front of witnesses, the permission of 6 people (the couple, and their parents) and the exchange of a dowery (with specific amounts for country and city dwellers). As well, the antithesis of marriage also has a ritual – the year of patience. I'm not sure if this can be counted as a ritual but it is a specific time where both parties, along with the community and the LSA strive to overcome the challenge and return to each other.

A bit more obscure ritual would be the instruction by Baha'u'llah in one Tablet to recite a verse 40 times with the rythmic flow of waves coming in and going out at Akka's shore. A person who does this, He said, would be cleansed of all transgressionsand forgiven by God. I suppose it can't hurt to try it out.

Another set of rituals has to do with death. There is a burial ring (with the inscription: “I came forth from God, and return unto Him, detached from all save Him, holding fast to His Name, the Merciful, the Compassionate”) which is to be placed on a finger (no particular one is specified) for those who were 15 years of age or older. Also, the body can not be transported more than one hour’s journey from the last location (mode of transport is not specified). The body must be buried – not cremated and it should be prepared for burial and wrapped in a shroud of silk or cotton, and be buried in either a stone, hard-wood or crystal coffin. As well the obligatory prayer for the dead is to be recited in congregation (the only prayer recited in this way in the Faith) for those who were 15 years of age or older. This does not mean that everyone in attendance repeats it (a common mistake). Another common mistake is to face the Qibblih during its recitation (this is not specified). But, according to Baha’i law, the dead should be buried facing the Qiblih.

Now, are some of these simply laws or rituals? I guess that is open to debate as it could be argued that the implementation of them borders on ritual. And so I continue:

Pilgrimage – as opposed to visitation to Bahji – also has its specific rites. For example, Baha’is do not have to shave their heads (phwee!) unlike Muslims but they do have to circumambulate, among other things (if you want more specifics regarding pilgrimage, I suggest you get a copy of the Surriyih Hajj). Unfortunately, Baha’is have been unable to go to pilgrimage as the two Holy sites are in Iraq and Iran (the house of Baha’u’llah in Baghdad and the house of the Bab in Shiraz, respectively). But they have been able to do perform another ritual related to pilgrimage; donating the expenses of the trip to the Fund rather than actually going in person.

I suppose the first ritual a Baha’i will engage in is signing a declaration card. This is an administrative act which was put in place by Shoghi Effendi and is not necessary really. But still, it is the first ritual that most Baha’is will – unwittingly – practice.

Another fascinating ritual which mainly Persian Baha’is (and maybe other with an ethnic origin in the Middle Eastern) engage in, is that related to tabarok (singular) or tabarokat (pl.). With thanks to SM, it means: that which gives blessings. This is an ancient, cultural ritual where a special person will touch or handle an object or gift, thereby endowing it with a special spiritual essence. For the Baha’is the object is no longer ordinary because it has been touched, blessed, if you will, or just because it was in the presence of the Bab or Baha’u’llah. It takes on a role similar to a relic (akin to the bones of Saints in Christianity).

Both the Bab and Baha'u'llah engaged in this ritual. The Bab, for example, gave a package of sugar and tea for a messenger to take to Mulla Husayn. As well, Baha'u'llah would often receive pilgrims and distribute to them small gifts (often mundane things such as a hankerchief, rock sugar, tea, etc.) . Sometimes these were brought by the pilgrims themselves (to be taken back with them as 'blessed' items) and other times they were truly gifts from His hands. These items are cherished and passed down from generation to generation. And because they are believed to hold sacred and powerful energies, they were used sparingly, in case of serious illness or injury, for example. Still to this day, many Baha'i families have in their possession many such tabarok items which they consider their most valuable possessions.

Shoghi Effendi extended this practice by giving, to a very few, special Baha'is, hairs and other such personal relics of Baha'u'llah. After Shoghi Effendi, this practice was continued in a different manner. Every few days, the roses that are grown in the many gardens of the Baha'i World Center are picked and their petals are carefully placed on the sacred threshold of the Shrine of the Bab and at Bahji.

To give those who have not gone there an idea, I'm talking about a ledge close the ground where a white embroidered cloth is placed. This also marks the closest that anyone can go to the actual burial sites. Baha'is often put their hands or heads on this ledge when praying at the Shrines. The rose petals are removed from this special place and dried. And when it is time for Baha'is to depart Israel, a handful of the petals are placed in envelopes and they are distributed to each individual; one envelope for Bahji and one for the Shrine of the Bab.

As an extension, Baha'is also prize anything that comes from the vicinity of the Shrines. For example, there is a very young citrus tree in the courtyard of the Shrine of Bahji. Since it can not be allowed to grow to full maturity, it is replaced every 3-4 years when its root system gets too big. When it is removed, any fruits (usually small oranges – like fruits from a rather large bonsai) are distributed to any lucky Baha'is who are there visiting at the time. Again, these fruits are considered tabarok, because they have been so close to the Qibblih.

As well, Baha'is extended similar rituals after the passing of Baha'u'llah when they would often go to the baths that he frequented and gathering up the water or dust that had been left behind. This was not restricted to the Prophets, either but those considered saints were given this treatment as well. For example, the gravesite of Ibn-Abhar was a popular destination for those seeking a tabarok (a handful of the earth from the top of his

gravesite). This was believed to contain curative powers. Interestingly, both Baha'is and Muslims used his gravesite for this purpose, lending support to the argument that it was a ritual borne out of cultural roots, as opposed to scriptural ones.

As well there are rituals that do not originate from the Writings or the actions of the Central Figures of the Faith. They are looksely self-imposed or learned repetitive behaviours. I include them tongue in cheek, so don't take it too seriously.

The greeting, Allah'u'Abha (sometimes used as goodbye also) is like a Baha'i "secret handshake". I'm not sure when it was started or how (whether it began with the believers emulating Baha'u'llah or Abdu'l-Baha). As well, it can be argued the painstakingly overstatment that what you are about to say regarding the Writings is but only your personal, humble, opinion (not to be construed as an attempt to imply an official and authoritative interpretation) is a Baha'i ritual. Actually, Baha'is are totally free to interpret the Writings personally as much as they wish. What they are prohibited from doing is imposing this personal interpretation or understanding on others as authoritative. And finally, there is a deeply imbedded ritual which Baha'is partake in every year (and sometimes every 5 years) which involves voting for the same people over and over and over again to fill administrative positions within the institutions.

If you are really interested in rituals, I recommend you to Dennis MacEoin's book: **"Rituals in Babism and Baha'ism"**.

Leaving rituals behind (tongue firmly planted in cheek), I also wanted to point out that the classification of the Writings is a fascinating topic (mostly for librarians). Here is another approach from the one discussed in the newsletter which I thought you might find interesting.

Before proceeding, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On to the 70′s class (replete, I'm sure, with huge over-sized collars, bell-bottom pants, and dangerously flammable polyester prints) . . .

[START DOCUMENT]

December 21, 1976

Dear Baha'i Friends:The Study Group got together again at Mehrdad Amanat's apartment on Sunday, December 20th, for another stimulating session. Eleven people were present. Unfortunately, Mehrdad himself had been called out of town unexpectadly and could not be there himself. However, he left us the key to his place and things went well.

[Ed. phone number corrections for Greg and Pamela Wahlstrom and Anthony Lee]

(Added to our mailing lest are:

Steven and Bonnie Barnes
[Ed. personal address])

(By the way, there was some talk about cutting down the mailing list, so if you want to continue receiving these letters and you have never come to one of the classes, you had better let someone know.)

After the group came to order, the first matter taken up was a short presentation by Anthony Lee on "Categories of Baha'i Scripture". It is well known that the various statements attributed to the Central Figures of the Faith and the Guardian and the House of Justice have different authenticities, ranks and different binding effect. Most people know, for instance, that Pilgrim's Notes have not binding effect. Mr. Lee attempted a tentative classification of all Baha'i "scripture" (which it might be added, raised as many questions as it answered, maybe more).

The classification was given in outline form:

I. The Holy Text of the Manifestation of God (this is separate and distinct from all other Baha'i scripture in that it represents direct Revelation from God. It is also unique as the Creative Word, that is, the words of the Manifestation create a new reality simply by virtue of their utterance. The words of the other figures of the Faith do not have this quality.)

A. The Writings of Baha'u'llah
1. Books and Tablets of universal import (according to Baha'u'llah these can be divided into nine categories. One Baha'i scholar has proposed the following scheme (Cf. The Revelation of Baha'u'llah, Vol. 1. p.43):

a. Tablets with a tone of command and authority (Revealed in the style of the Quran?)
b. Those with a tone of meekness and supplication (prayers?)

c. Interpretations of old Scriptures and beliefs and doctrines
d. Laws and ordinances
e. Mystical Writings
f. Tablets regarding matters of government and world order, including those to the kings and rulers
g. Tablets concerned with scientific and philosophical matters, eg. medicine, alchemy, etc.
h. Exhortations to education and divine virtues
i. Tablets regarding social teachings

2. Particular tablets and exhortations to individuals which have no binding effect on mankind as a while. (There was some question of the validity of such a category.)

B. The Writings of the Bab (which rank below those of "Him Whom God shall Manifest" according to the testimony of the Bab, Himself.) Apparently, the Bab ranked His Own Writings as follows (Cf. Johson, Ph.D. Dissertation, p.152; Bayan (Nicholas Transl.) III, 17; Browne, Traveller's Narrative, p.344-5):
1. Verses (similar to 1.a. above)
2. Prayers (similar to 1.b. above)
3. Commentaries (similar to 1.c. above)
4. Scientific treatises (similar to 1.g. above)
5. Writings in Persian (as opposed to Arabic)

II. The Writings of Abdu'l-Baha (Explanations, elucidation, and interpretation of the Holy Text)

A. Tablets and books of Abdu'l-Baha which bear his seal and signature (these are binding on all believers) (No distinction was made here between Tablets written before the Ascension of Baha'u'llah, and those written after, though such a distinction may be possible.)
B. Records of public talks and other statements of Abdu'l-Baha which did not get His written approval (no binding effect)
C. Statements and Writings of Abdu'l-Baha not related to the Faith (there was some question regarding whether or not these are regarded to be infallible. The question was not settled.)

III. The works of the Guardian

A. Interpretation and application of the text (which must be accepted as infallible)
B. Statements regarding the protection of the Faith (also infallible) (Cf. UHJ letter to Richard Grieser 7/25/74)
C. Letters to individuals (which may not have general application)
D. Writings and statements on non-Baha'i topics (which are subject to error)

IV. Letters and statements of the Universal House of Justice (all of which may be infallible. Mr. Lee did not attempt any classification of this category.)

V. Pilgrim's Notes

These are of interest, but have no binding effect. There are no grounds for suppressing them, however.

VI. Stories and sayings regarding the Central Figures of the Faith and the Guardian which can not be traced to a single source. (Again, these may be of interest and should not be suppressed, but have not binding effect.)

The above presentation sparked quite a bit of discussion on various topics. The group focused briefly on the whole question of infallibility. It was agreed that no one could provide an adequate definition of the term. Clearly, infallibility does not imply omniscience since the Manifestation of God did not know everything — and neither does the House of Justice. Someone present noted that some Baha'is have gone as far as to suggest that infallibility should be regarded as a duty which rests on the believers, rather than an intrinsic quality of the Center of the Faith. Many were uncomfortable with this idea.

This led to a brief discussion of the nature of the Manifestation of God. Some Baha'is (notably Saeid Khadivian) have maintained that the Manifestation, from the moment of His conception is fully conscious of both past and future and stands beyond human limitation of any kind. He displays apparent human emotion and feeling as a mercy to mankind, but is really beyond human feelings. Such passages which display apparent anger, sorrow, dissapointment and the like are interpreted as only written for the benefit of man, but not genuine. Especially Baha'u'llah's experience in the Siyah-Chal is regarded as only outward display. Thought the discussion was not pursued, most members of the class agreed that such a view is unacceptable since it reduces most of Baha'u'llah's life to a meaningless charade.

Next, the class turned to Susan Berkman who had prepared a paper on “Myth and Ritual in the Baha’i Faith”. Her reading was puncuated by several mini-discussions throughout the rest of the afternoon. Not everything can be reported here, but I hope to atleast do justice to the main points of argument.

Ms. Berkman began by pointing out that there is no agreement in the academic world on an adequate definition of the term “myth”. Some scholars have emphasized the explanatory functions of myth as a primitive science , while others have tended to see myth as a canon of cultural symbols which order social life. The whole study of mythology is intertwined with theories of lost civilization, primordial culture, Freudian interpretations and nineteenth century religious arguments. Much of it (the academic work) is just nonsense.

Ms. Berkman never settled on a full definition of myth herlsef but leaned toward the idea of myth as a symbolic statement. She was especially interested in the theories of [Ed. empty white space in text] Wallace. He maintains that myth and ritual are always closely associated and even reciprocal. These are intended to serve five different functions: 1) to control events; 2) to heal sickness or create disease; 3) to organize one’s life; 4) to remit psychopathology; 5) to revitalize society.

The Academic study of myth has been limited to ancient (and so called) primitive society. Hence, even the term myth connotes falsehood. No scholar has ever denied that myth exists in our own society, but no one has yet made a serious study of it. Therefore, it is hard to know how to apply the concept of myth to contemporary beliefs.

But, Ms. Berkman maintained, there is both myth and ritual in the Baha’i Faith. She especially pointed to the Kitab-i-Iqan, which she proposed, may be seen as Baha’ullah’s Own dissertation on myth and symbolism and its role in social and personal life. In the Iqan, Baha’u’llah indicates that the Manifestation of God deliberately speak in symbolic language, both to awaken mankind and to serve as a test of the pure in heart. Myth, therefore, has the function of providing symbols which embody deep spiritual truths and also having an outward physical meaning. The myth serves both as a key to spiritual reality (which cannot finally be expressed in words) and a test of those who are able to appreciate the myth on this spiritual level.

Ms. Berkman speculated that all mythology must find its ultimate source in the words of a Manifestation of God. The Prophets use symbolic language to explain abstract concepts

and “unseen realities”. (Some Answered Questions pp.94-98) These symbols are often understood by the people in a literal sense. This literal interpretation is then elaborated, embellished and codified by clergymen and scholars. This codified, de-spiritualized symbolism becomes mythology.

Ms. Berkman pointed out that Baha’u’llah often uses highly symbolic language which has some of the characteristics of myth eg. The Seven Valleys and the Tablet of the Holy Mariner . Baha’is must resist the temptation to crystalize and codify these symbols as have been done in the past. To some extent this is already happening. For instance, the historical details of the Martyrdom of the Bab are in considerable doubt. There are atleast three different versions of the event, of which Nabil’s account is only one. None of these versions is given by an eyewitness to the Martyrdom itself. Therefore, historically, the details of the execution are open to question. All sources agree that the first volley missed the Bab, but what happened next, (and just before) is an historical question which has not yet been fully resolved. Nonetheless, a clear Baha’i mythology has grown up to fill in the gaps.

Ms. Berkman briefly touched on the question of ritual in the Baha’i Faith. There are undeniable rituals in the Baha’i Faith, the most important one being prayer. But there is also fasting, feast, etc. These rituals, especially prayer, fulfill all of Wallace’s five categories. (see above) Ms. Berkman preferred a broad definition of ritual as any repeated behaviour with sacred significance. But, even in the narrow sense of a ceremony which must be performed in a prescribed way, the Baha’i Faith has rituals in it. (Anyone who has doubts about this is invited to look over the section of the Synopsis and Codification of the Aqdas on prayer.) Ms. Berkman also quoted from a letter of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Columbia in which the House corrects the notion that there is no ritual in the Faith. They explain that the Faith has no elaborate, man-made ceremonies which must be attended by a clergyman as does other religions, but there are Baha’i rituals.

At this point, our time ran out.

The next meeting of the class will be held on Sunday, January 2nd at 3 pm at the home of Anthony Lee [Ed. home address, directions and phone number follows]

Robert Ballenger kindly volunteered to give a report on an article which appeared in the Folklore Research Center Studies (Journal) in 1973 entitled “The Baha’is of Acre”. It is a sociological study of the remnant of covenant-breakers left in the Holy Land. Quite interesting. And Greg Wahlstrom agreed to make a presentation next time on “The Calamity” in Baha’i Scriptures (hotsy, totsy!). So everyone, please come and be prepared to stay as late as possible.

With apologies for bad typing . . . . .

Anthony A. Lee

[END DOCUMENT]

Links:
The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#6]

My Notes:This newsletter discusses Covenant-Breakers in general and the remnants of the Baha’is who were declared covenant breakers in Akka, specifically. In contrast to what most Baha’is say, the truth is that the Baha’i Faith did suffer schisms and splinter groups. However, they are extremely small and without any real significance. It is important to note that eventhough individual Baha’is are instructed to sever all ties and dealings with covenant breakers, often in the history of the Faith, the Central Figures have continued to be in touch with them and have in many instances given them repeated chances to repent and re-join the community. I’m not aware of the Guardian engaging in this, but Baha’u’llah and Abdu’l-Baha, certainly did so repeatedly.

As you will read below, these splinter communities still exist today in Israel (to some degree). They have not thrived but neither have they dissapeared. In fact there is a ‘Baha’i House’ right at the foot of Mount Carmel (near Ben Gurion’s roundabout) and as the paper cited explains, there is also a small Akka community. Its quite fascinating that many of the people in these remaining splinter communities are physical descendants of Baha’u’llah.

(There is also a fantastic treatment of Kheirella's defection in another newsletter, but since that is somewhere in the 1983 files, you'll have to be patient.)

In the newsletter below it states that no one knows why Remey made his claim. But, Charles Mason Remey's reasons are clear, to those who have been curious enough to investigate them – something which Baha'is are allowed, although some may say, discouraged, to do. He claimed that he was Abdu'l-Baha's adopted son, having gotten this notion from the Master's reference to him as a 'son' in a Tablet. To most, it is clear, that this is simply the loving, and most Persian, hyperbole of Abdu'l-Baha and in no way constitutes a legal or binding literal understanding of the words. And in no way does it abrogate the clear scriptural definition of lineage and descendant as used in the Will and Testament of Abdu'l-Baha. But somehow, this is all explained away using dazzling mental gymnatics.

Before proceeding, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .
[START DOCUMENT]

[Ed. home address]
January 3, 1977
Dear Baha'i Friends:

The package being sent out from the Baha'i class is unusually large this time but it contains a real gold mine of informatin and correspondence. If you skim throuth the pages you will see that Denis MacEoin's eagerly awaited reply to our letter of November 27th discussion (summarised in the letter of December 5) arrived. A copy is being sent to everyone on the mailing list. Those of you who like a good fight will have a feast.

It is not surprising that the arguments raised in the discussion failed to convince Mr. MacEoin (pronounced Mc-Que-in), academic arguments rarely end with one side convincing the other. But the exchange of ideas has proved to be tremendously exciting. We should all feel grateful to Mr. MacEoin for taking a good deal of time to formulate a careful response for us and for helping to further the international sharing of ideas, which is one of the goals of the class.

Also enclosed, is a letter accompanying Mr. MacEoin's reply which the members may find interesting. It contains some information about classes similar to ours in the British Isles, as well as some very kind statements about our humble efforts.

Further enclosed is Robert Ballanger's summary of the class meeting of January 2nd. Unfortunately, Greg Wahlstrom's presentation on "The Calamity" was not ready at this class and was rescheduled for January 23rd at 2pm. So the discussion centred on Mr. Ballenger's report on the article "The Baha'i Community of Acre" by Erik Cohen, Folklore Research Center Studies, 3 (1973) pp. 119-141 [Ed. code or Dewey call-number of some sort follows]. This was followed by an impromptu reading of a few pages of Vernon E. Johnson's Ph.D. dissertation, "An Historical Analysis of Critical Transformations in the Evolution of the Baha'i World Faith" (Baylor Univeristy, 1974) [Ed. available from Bell and Howell Information and Learning] on the dissention within the ranks of Mason Remey's followers.

THE NEXT CLASS will be held at the home of Anthony Lee on Sunday, January 9th at 3:00 pm. [Ed. home address follows] THE CLASS WILL FEATURE two presentations: one, a report on two articles by James Keene in Sociometry and The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion on the Faith and a presentation by Bernie Barnes on "The Baha'i Theory of Personality".

THE CLASS AFTER THAT will be held on Sunday, January 23rd at 3 pm also at Anthony Lee's house. It will include a presentation by Jon Henderson on Paul's symbolism in Corinthians I and Greg Wahlstrom's analysis of "The Calamity" in the writings of Shoghi Effendi. Don't miss it.

With Baha'i love,

Anthony A. Lee
[Ed. signed below]

P.S. I will be out of town next week but I will leave the key with someone.

Notes from the study group meeting of Jan. 2, 1977.

Attendance at study class is on a steady increase, hitting 15 at the latest meeting. Tony Lee, at whose apartment the meeting were held, invited all present to stay for a Mexican-style

dinner. Happily, we all survived. Actually, the food was delicious. And Tony showed he had mastered an old family mealtime recipe: starve the guests and, by the time the food arrives, they'll eat anything and love it.

With several persons on hand for the first time, Tony, our impromptu host and chief schemer and eminence mauve (the eminence grise was at the cleaner's; we had to settle for the next available shade) again explained the purpose of the class, to wit, an open discussion of the Baha'i Faith, with no taboo subjects.

We also agreed that poor ol' Tony should not have to foot the bill for mailing out these summaries. As a graduate student, he is a permanent member of the poverty class and could qualify for food stamps. Anyhow, it was more or less agreed by common consent that members of the class ought to chip in some money to help offset postage costs so you can perous this bilious material. But no amount was fixed, so Tony probably wound up collecting around $1.87. The moral of the story is , next time you come to class, bring money.

After some brief consultation, it was decided to retain the existing class structure in which some volunteer presents what amounts to a paper on some aspect of the Faith while everyone else present uses its points as a springboard for discussion. Following a break, a second part is devoted to an open forum in which pet peeves and various bits of mental effuvia about the Faith are trotted out and beaten to a pulp. It's the closest thing we have to an exorcism ritual.

Bob Ballenger presented a paper on the covenant breakers of Akka, a small group of dissident Baha'is who told Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi to take a hike, and as a result, have to stand in a corner forever. While Ballenger's paper was (mercifully) short, an even shorter summation will be outlined here. (Well, if you showed up to the classes instead of reading this precis, you'd get the whole wazoo. If you want to know just how short the summary of Ballenger's paper is going to be, you just read it. All seriousness aside, here is the summation.)

The paper is based on Eric Cohen's study for UCLA's Folklore Research Center on the topic of "The Baha'i Community of Acre" (1972). Essentially, Cohen focuses on a small group (probably less than 100 persons, although he writes "several score" without mentioning a specific figure) of dissident Baha'is (or "covenant breakers" as we somewhat

inelegantly call them) still living in Akka, Israel. Cohen's study focuses on the dwindling band as it winds down to probable extinction.

The Baha'is of Acre, as Cohen calls this "residual religious community" (his definition of a group too small inactive to qualify for sect status) splif off from the authority of Abdu'l-Baha sometime in the early 1900′s, although Cohen does not pin down the date or the event that led to the rupture. At that time, the covenant breakers and those Baha'is who remained loyal to Abdu'l-Baha were about numerically equal.

Many Baha'is are under the impression that covenant breaking occurs at transitions of leadership in the Faith. This is not quite accurate. Cohen's paper makes it clear that the Baha'is of Akka, accepted the authority of Abdu'l-Baha and, those who joined their ranks later, recognized Shoghi Effendi as the rightful heir and Guardian of the Faith. The splits came over doctrinal matters. Abdu'l-Baha'is emphasis on spreading the Faith to the West and Shogi Effendi's dedication to raising up the administrative order led the dissidents to say, in effect, "Hold it, this is not the Baha'i Faith!" Cohen writes that while the Master and the Guardian regarded the universalization of the Faith as an essential virtue, "the Acre Baha'is conceived of it rather as a sell out to the West."

For a while the dissident Baha'is tried to mount what was, in effect, a competing Baha'i Faith, the Baha'i World Federation, presided over by one Amin Effendi, a descendent of Baha'u'llah. But the group never attempted to form a local spiritual assembly in Akka and the Baha'i World Federation, apparently never amounted to much. One of the maddening things about Cohen's is that while he mentions the creation of this organizationand dates its inception about 1950, he provides no clue as to its current status and activity (if any).

One reason the dissident Baha'is amount to small change is because they tried a legal coup against Shoghi Effendi in early 1950′s and got clobbered. As a result, when the dust settled, the covenant breakers lost control of all Baha'i properties and now have only limited access to the Shrine of Baha'u'llah in Bahji.

Their apparent spiritual collapse is coupled with a virtual civil isolation and Cohen writes the six extended families that make up the Baha'is of Akka "are clearly separated from the rest of society." To make matters worse, they have indulged in infighting amongst themselves. It has not all been the suffering the wrath of God — as we Baha'is might like to believe. The covenant breakers have become, in some instance, land owners in Akka,

which makes them something of a status class in that poor city. But, even so, they remain virtually social outcasts in the eyes of the Muslim population of Akka despite attempts to blend into the local scenery. Cohen writes that many of the dissident Baha'is have become shopkeepers and — you'll love this next part — "wholesalers of groceries and wines."

Although it is not Cohen's intention to do so, his study reveals the long term effects of covenant breaking. A quote from his paper says it all:

"The Baha'is of Acre do not live a live oriented predominantly, or even primarily, towards religion, as could be expected of a group descended from the Founder of the Faith and his closest companions. Outwardly, they do not manifest any signs of specific Baha'i religiousity: they did not form a local "spiritual assembly", nor do they possess their own place for religous observances. As they explain it, religion is for them an individual and personal matter. Some of my informants claimed that Baha'ism is not really a religion, but a way of life, something one carries in one's heart; outside manifestations of religiosity are hence unimportant. A person remains a Baha'i, in this sense, even if he marries into another faith. However little they manifest their faith outwardly, the Baha'is assured me that they remained steadfastly attached to their Baha'i identity."

Well, the dissident Baha'is may think that they have their faith in their hearts, but Cohen's research makesit clear they are on the endangered species list. He writes that, under the present circumstances, the covenant breakers "will not be able to continue to exist as a distinct religious group for more than one or at most two generations." In an attempt to curry favor or to blend in with the local populace, the dissident Baha'is made a serious boo-boo (its a talent they seem to possess in abundance) in 1948, when Israel conducted its first official census, by listing themselves as — are you ready for this [Ed. text appears to show 'socko', while intention was probably:] cookoo characterization? — "Baha'is-Muslims."

Beyond this, the dissident Baha'is are dying out from sheer religious attrition. Cohen notes that many of the women marry Muslims. The men, however, do not. The reason is that Muslim fathers are reluctant to give their daughters in marriage to persons they consider to be religious heretics. The attempts by dissident Baha'is to submerge themselves in Akka's Muslim culture, evidently, is failing. So the men either marry Christian, Jewish or, in some cases, women from covenant breaking families in Iran, imported to the Holy Land. It is not clear from Cohen's paper just how this works.

The final outcome of this history of covenant breaking is a sad one to report and it is fraught with irony. But let Cohen tell it in his own words: “Our evidence then points to the conclusion that the Baha’is of Acre are gradually being re-absorbed by Islam owing to external isolation from the larger Baha’i community and to lack of internal cohesion.”

The presentation of this paper led to a general discussion of covenant breaking and its results. A couple of notes from that palaver are of special interest. It was pointed out, that at some future date, the last tattered remnants of the band of covenant breakers will probably be reconverted to the Baha’i Faith. They could have saved themselves (and everyone else, too) by not bugging out to begin with.

Easily the most important point made was that covenant-breaking is an ego related disease, one that strikes when some individual decides he is an authority and can tell other Baha’is what to do. This is a crucial point. Covenant breaking does not truly occur until some person sets himself up as an authority figure within the confines of the Faith. We also briefly touched on the reasons that Abdu’l-Baha virtually forbade the Baha’is from having any contact with covenant breakers (see The Will and Testament of Abdu’l-Baha for specifics). It was the Master’s judgement that, because covenant breaking involves a person’s ego, which we all have, it is a particularly dangerous phenomenon and the only sure treatment is quarantine. This is a hasty summary, but is more or less accurate.

We also journeyed into a brief discussion of covenant breaking in the West. For those among you with a morbid curiousity about such events, here is a historical summary. In 1960, Hand of the Cause of God, Charles Mason Remey decided (for reasons that have never been clear) that he was the second Guardian of the Baha’i Faith. Nevermind that his assumption of that station violated the Will and Testament of Abdu’l-Baha, and nevermind the fact that Remey signed a document stating that Shoghi Effendi didn’t have an heir — somehow by some grandeloquent leap of logic, he was The Man. For which pronouncement, he got tossed out on his ear.

Then, in December 1961, Remey gave one of his followers, a man named Joel Maringella [Ed. correct name is Joel Marangella and is substituted hereafter] (I’m not sure of the spelling here), a sealed envelope, instructing Marangella, to open if when the time was right. In, September, 1964, Remey, now in his 90s, appointed Marangella to head the Second International Baha’i Council (Shoghi Effendi appointed Remey to head the first

council, the forerunner of the Universal House of Justice), and Remey, in effect handed over the reins of the, ahem, Orthodox Baha'i Faith, as he called it, to Marangella.

Shortly thereafter, Marangella went to Switzerland where he had placed the sealed envelope in a safe deposit box and opened the document. In it, Mason Remey, appointed Marangella as the third Guardian. Marangella decided to sit on this bit of news until after Remey's death. But (ah the plot sickens, er, thickens) in May, 1967. Remey made a public appointment of one Donald Harvey as the third Guardian. Hey, wait a minute, howled Marangella, his feelings understandably hurt, [Ed. illegible word, probably:] but what about me? He sent Remey a photostatic copy of his appointment letter, but the old boy had no recollection of having done it. Whereupon, Marangella decided Remey had gone potty sometime back and was not in fact the Guardian anymore and had not been since the day in that bank vault when, trembling with excitement, he (Marangella) had opened the succession envelope to find his own name in its innards. Just where this left poor ol' Don Harvey is not apparent. But Marangella proclaimed his own Guardianship and evidently won most of the covenant breakers to his cause, leaving Harvey with an empty title and three little old ladies who thought he had cute dimples. There's more. In November 1969, [Ed. empty or illegible space which is probably:] Joel Marangella claimed to [Ed. crossed out word 'the' and replaced by handwritten word, probably] be the third Guardian. Here comes the cute part. In January, 1973, some man named Rex King decided he was the Regent of the Cause of Baha'u'llah (catchy title, that one) and that Marangella was not the Guardian. And so it has gone.

The point is evident. Without a covenant, there is no central point of unity. Without that, there is nothing to hold the covenant breakers together, so they fall apart. If it weren't such a grave matter, it might be fun to watch happen.

[Ed. the newsletter summarizing the classes ends here and what follows is a letter from Denis MacEoin]

———————-

[Ed. whited out block of text on right hand upper corner with the date written in later as '21 De. 1976]

Lee,

Thank you very much for your two letters dated November 21 and December 5 [Ed. date could be either 5 or 6] respectively. The details which you have sent me concerning your Baha'i classes in Los Angeles are among the most exciting I have for some time and I wish to assure all of those involved in that venture of my whole-hearted support and enthusiasm for it. I was particularly impressed by the four principles on which you have decided to base the functioning of your classes. The second of those guidelines – that it should be improper for anyone to question the belief of another participant in Baha'u'llah and so on – seems to me, to be the most significant. I assume that one or more of those concerned in drawing up these guidelines have experienced some form of attack, of this score, and I can only say that by no means are they alone and that you all have, in this respect, my sympathy and that of many other believers in this country [Ed. England] . It is, I feel, imperative for the sure development of serious Baha'i studies in the future that such an attitude prevail; it can be much to easy for someone to defeat an argument with which he personally does not agree (regardless of whether he be in the right or not) by using against the proponents of that argument the ultimate sanction that 'it is in conflict with the teachings of the Faith'. It is not necessary for such a person to demonstrate the validity of his argument, it is enough that he hold some position of eminence in the Faith, or that he be regarded as an experienced and therefore (!) knowledgeable Baha'i, or that he be sufficiently forceful in putting forward such an objection. Provided it is accepted by the participants in a seminar, your guidelines should effectively preclude the use of such tactics and open the field for wide-ranging and meaningful discussion. But I fear that the intellectuals and rationalists within the Faith will have to endure much misunderstanding and even attack before before the harmonization of reason with faith can take place in the Baha'i community. Every effort that takes us nearer to that goal is to be commended.

[Ed. illegible or uncopied word(s)] is you say, similar seminars were begun several years ago in Britain. These were initiated by Moojan Momen, Peter Smith, and myself about 1970 and have taken place very intermittently since then. Our basic problem is that there is no one place in these islands where a fair-sized group of Baha'is interested in a more academic approach to the study of the Faith exists. In order to gather together a group almost the size of yours, we have to invite people from every part of Britain, and even then can not be sure of much of an attendance. Our most ambitious project is due take place next April when a seminar on Baha'i Studies will be held under the auspices of the Department of Sociology in the University of Lancaster. We hope that the four people currently engaged in research on Baha'i topics in Britain will read papers (these will be:

Peter Smith, University of Lancaster, Sociology of the Baha'i Faith; Abbas Amanat, Oxford, Early Babi History; Viva Perdu, London, Theological Comparison of Christ and Baha'u'llah; and myself, Background of Babi/Bahai Religions). In addition, we shall be inviting one or two other competent Baha'is (such as Moojan Momen) to participate, as well as some non-Baha'i academics working in related fields. I have sent both Peter Smith and Moojan Momen [Ed. illegible text typed over text] copies of your report on your initial class; I hope in return to be able to send a write-up of the proceedings of the Lancaster seminar.

I enclose a reply to your comments on my article on "The Concept of Nation in Islam"; I hope I sound too harsh in my come-back, but I felt it was best to be as open as possible in my reaction to your remarks, which were, nonetheless, appreciated [Ed. MacEoin's reply is here] I speculate that one of the causes of misunderstanding over this article may have been the fact, referred to by you in your first report, that there exists withing your group two 'camps' – those who wish for a more intellectual oriented and academically disciplined approach and those whose interest lay primarily in discussion of personal questions and problems within the Faith, as related to personal life. I can well appreciate the dilemma; it occurs at every Summer School and will, I feel, continue to dog Baha'i studies for a long time. While one would hesitate to suggest any actual division among the friends, I feel that there is a definite need to distinguish more radically between varying interests, capacities, experience levels and approaches, otherwise one is invariably seeking to compromise and constantly falling between at least two stools. The underlying unity must be expressed in other ways – as it will undoubtedly be in the future Baha'i society. I feel that one of the most serious mistakes we make at this stage in the development of the Faith is to try to make all Baha'is conform to the same standards, even in literature, music, art and suchlike, in the false belief that uniformity can somehow bring unity. To some people it seems divisive that one Baha'i should be a college professor and another a caretaker in that college, and we end up trying – as I was once instructed to do by a Counsellor – to "talk to the lowest common denominator". The keynote of the Faith is diversity, not only in race and religious background, but in talent, in intellect, in forms of creativity, in interests, in tastes, even in spiritual development. Perhaps you could find a way to hold some classes to cater for experienced and deep[ened] Baha'is in general terms, while creating other classes, specifically for intensive study of the academic aspects of the Faith, the spiritual aspects, the social, 'everyday' aspects. The results are much more likely to be valid at every level, while general conclusions could be shared for everyone's benefit at the general classes.

On a personal note – I look forward to meeting you next year when you come to England – perhaps you could let me know when you expect to arrive and where you will be working. Please give my fondest regards to Paul Slaughter, if and when you see him – tell him to press ahead with the outlines of the exhibition and that I shall be in touch. In the meantime, do please keep me informed of developments at your classes; I look forward to hearing from you before long.
With best wishes,[Ed. signature: Denis MacEoin]
Denis MacEoin
[END DOCUMENT]

Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#7]

My Notes:This newsletter is a bit underwhelming. But what did you expect? They can't all be about taboo subjects like women on the House of Justice, abortion and contraception, covenant-breakers, etc. There are really good stuff coming up, so bear with it for now.

Before proceeding, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]
[Ed. personal home address]
Jan. 14 (or thereabouts) 1977
Dear Baha'i Friends –

The Jan. 9 meeting of our still un-named study class got underway with about 14 people present, which is about all Tony's apartment can hold. If attendance grows much more, admission will be standing room only. A few people trickled in late, their arrival delayed by the telecast of the Superbowl. (For those who might have missed that event, attended with all the ballyhoo that one might expect to be reserved for the Second Coming, the Oakland

Raiders beat the Minnesota Vikings 38-14. It was strictly a rompf for Oakland; Minnesota was never in the game. The Vikings have made it to the Superbowl four times, and lost the game on every occassion. The time has come to label the Vikes for what they are: choke artists. They freeze up and can not win the Big One.)

The session's discussion topic was presented by Joel Roth, a sociology student at UCLA. She reviewed two articles written by James Keene, a Baha'i, in Sociometry and, ahem, The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion on the Faith. (Is there some allied publication along the lines of Religious Study of Science?)

Here, with apologies with Ms. Roth (who also hereby is offered the right of corrective reply), is a summation of her presentation:

The object of Mr. Keene's research is to determine the influence of religious belief and behaviour on personality, particularly neuroticism, sponteneity and worldmindedness. He set out to discover how much characteristics of religious behaviour and personality interaction differ between Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Baha'is and those without any religious affiliation.

"There is little agreement among psychologists and sociologists about the relation of religious beheviors to other personal and social behaviors. For example, Freud maintained that religion can act as the "universal obsessional neurosis of humanity," fixating individuals in an infantile stage until the illusive doctrine is discarded," Keene writes. He contrasts that with the view of Jung who held that participation in a "living religion" has a therapeutic effect on personality disorders.

Mr. Keene's study created some experimental variables and subjected these to factor analysis as a means of keeping his research bias-free. He also used four factors in his work that ought to be briefly described here. The first of these is "Salient / Irrelevant," representing the role of religion in the life of modern man. It measures the importance the test subject places on and participates in his religion. The second factor is "Spiritual / Secular," dealing with intangible notions such as afterlife, prayer, the soul and so forth.

"Skeptical / Approving" is used to measure the validity of religious belief in the minds of the subjects versus scepticism about its value and role. Finally, Mr. Keene sets up "Orthodox / Personal" to describe whether religion is perceived and experienced in the

context of doctrine and ritual or in terms of meditation, spiritual contemplation and respect for nonbelievers.

Ok, so after gathering all his test data and buzzing it through the computer, Mr. Keene arrived at the conclusions that the most "ethnocentric" groups were the Protestants and Catholics. They tended more towards doctrinaire religious attitudes and were less flexible in their tolerance. While both the Jews and the nonaffiliates were more "worldminded," the Baha'is ranked highest in this category.

His sampling led him to conclude that "For Baha'is, engaging in bahavior Salient to religion with a Personal and Approving outlook on religion is highly correlated with a pattern of Worldminded, Spontaneous, and Adaptive behaviors . . . these Baha'i personality and religion patterns are not typical in other groups studies."

"This interaction seems to support Jung's association of religious conversion with an adaptive transformation of personality," Mr. Keene notes.

His conclusions were greeted with considerable scepticism on the part of Baha'is in the class. It was pointed out, for example, that religious conversion played a major role in influencing the results of Keene's study. Those who adopt a religious belief or change beliefs experience what amounts to a spiritual crisis which forces them to examine their spiritual concepts. It is only after this crisis that a resolution can come in the form of acceptance — after examination — of a new set of religious beliefs. This is a capsule summary of what most Baha'is have gone through, since the vast majority of the Western believers are converts.

Members of the class wondered what would have happened if Keene, taking this matter into account, had sought out converts to other faiths, deliberately including them in his study. The suspicion was raised that the Jews, Protestants and Catholics used as test samples, probably were born into Jewish, Protestant and Catholic families and might, for that reason, test out differently than converts to those religions.

It was noted that religious systems with an elaborate dogmatic structure, the Catholic church for example, tended in the Keene study to be more ethnocentric and less flexible. Might not that same thing occur to the Baha'i Faith in, say, 200 years when its own involved administrative structure and complex theology have taken root?

It is a fair statement to report that Keene's thesis bafflement as it did argument. And, no wonder. Consider his description of his procedures: "Using the personality and religion factors as input variables, a canonical analysis was performed for each matched sample and for all subjects in the five matched samples together, thus including within – and among – group variances. For purposes of interpretation, 'canonical variate patterns' were obtained from the usual canonical coefficient matrices by calculating the right general inverses of the transposes of the matrices scaled to unit variances. A canonical variate pattern, consists of a correlated pair of personality and religious variates, defined by factors."

You got all that, right?

Ms. Roth did her best, and with jargon-soaked language like that, it wasn't easy. It was not possible within the confines of our class, nor with the limited time available, to really evaluate Mr. Keene's study. The suspicion persisted that he set up a series of straw men and proceeded to bowl them over. And so it went.

Still grappling with the elusive concepts of "cognitive", "experiential" and "self-defining," and neck deep [Ed. neap?] tide water of sociology (and they call economics "the dismal science"), we threw in the towel. And we adjourned in frustration to go out and get roaring drunk (had you there for a minute, right?)

We had to postpone one class scheduled for this time. So, at the NEXT CLASS, on Sunday, Jan. 23 at 3pm (mark your calendars) Bonnie Barnes will present a paper on "A Baha'i Theory of Personality," (subtitled "Is there life after birth?"). Also slated for presentation is Jon Hendershot's review of St. Paul's use of symbolism in I Corinthians.

And, for you fright fans, Greg Wahlstrom, on Jan. 30, [will] outline the Calamity in the Baha'i Writings. With the catastrophe arriving on the 30th, you are advised to get your tickets early. Due to a lack of existence, the 31st will be cancelled.

And, on more mundane notes, (after the world ends its all downhill from there), we decided to make next time a pot luck supper, but did not assign foods to anyone . . . so lets not all show up with potato chips, hah? Future events, Steve Barnes has promised to present a paper on economics and the Faith. And Bob Ballanger is toying with the idea of sex and the Faith (slide show optional). He says he might be out of touch for a while, purportedly doing (heh, heh) "field research".

For those of you who keep track of such things, we've some new names to add to our mailing list: [Ed. first name 'Richard Kunez' is struck out with the handwritten note 'dropped'] And: Vivian White [Ed. personal home address follows] Anyone who has read this far deserves it. Bob Ballanger prepared (?) these notes. Those whose ruffled honor to demand satisfaction ought to remember that choice of weapons belongs to the challengee, not the challenger. Ol' Ballanger will probably opt for water pistols filled with cherry kool-aid at 5 feet.
****
[Ed. the following appears to have been added after the above several pages - the text is much more prominent and dark]
THE NEXT MEETING will be held at the home of Anthony Lee [Ed. home address and phone number follows] AT 2 PM. Bring a pot and we will eat dinner and make merry far into the night.Other corrections and additions to our list:

[Ed. ten names follow (with addresses) but they were struck out and by handwriting noted 'dropped' - only Sandra Parr Tjitendero's name is not struck out]
[END DOCUMENT]

Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#8]

My Notes:This edition of the newsletter contains the first attempt to broach Biblical topics within the class – specifically, Paul's pattern of composition in I Corinthians. As well, there is a restatement of the general guiding principles of the group for those who have recently joined. The guiding principles are important foundations for any intelligent and fruitful discussion and I can understand why they are repeated here. Most Baha'is (then, as now) have a sense that they shouldn't ask hard questions nor stray from that which is generally accepted for fear that others (individual Baha'is as well as institutions) think that their faith is suspect. Therefore, there is a real need to establish these basic principles as given before proceeding.

Before proceeding, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70′s class . . .

[START DOCUMENT]

[Ed. home address removed]
January 26, 1977
Dear Baha'i Friends,Jon Hendershot of Manhattan Beach made the main presentation at the Baha'i study group meeting of January 23. His talk was on Paul's pattern of composition and use of symbols in the 15th chapter of I Corinthians.

Jon noted that many Baha'is blame Paul for the conception that many modern Christians have of a literal descent from a literal heaven of Christ's physically-resurrected body. In I Corinthians 15, for instance, this impression is given since Paul asserts Christ's resurrection before discussions of the afterlife and the return of Christ and the setting up [of] the Kingdom of God on earth. Between these two subjects come these famous lines: "As in Adam all men die so in Christ will all be brought to life; but each in his own place. Christ the firstfruits, and afterwards, at his coming , those who belong to Christ." The literal interpretation of these line is further enforced by Paul's assertion that true Christians at Christ's second coming will be "clothed with immortality"without physically dying.

For Baha'is, Paul's message is not confusing. He asserts that there is an afterlife where souls exist after the body dies. Christ was resurrected spiritually to that Kingdom. The return of Christ is described symbolically. Adam is a symbol for man's lower nature, while Christ is a symbol for man's higher nature. Through Christ's perfections, individuals can attain to the higher nature.

What makes I Corinthians 15 confusing is the juxtaposition of a discussion of the afterlife and the return of Christ with the symbols of Christ and Adam sandwiched in between. With all of these subjects on top of each other, the whole chapter has a phantasmagorical effect. Certainly, this pattern is deliberate in asmuch as Paul follows it twice within the space of I Corinthians 15 alone. The question is: why does Paul do this? Does he seek to befuddle or mislead his readers, or is there method in his madness.

Jon asserted that there are two reasons for Paul's pattern. First, the afterlife and the Kingdom of God on earth, that is to be established at Christ's second coming, are analogous subjects in Paul's mind. This was demonstrated by showing that these two subjects plus two others — the soul and the Christian church — were all individually (and perhaps collectively) symbolized for Paul by the single image of Christ's crucifiction and resurrection. Paul writes that we must all "crucify" "the lower natures" (Galatians 5:22-25) and take on the spiritual perfections of the higher nature. Elsewhere (Romans 12:5), he calls all Christians and Christ all together "one body." Christ's church and the soul are prefigurations of both the Kingdom of God (the afterlife) and the Kingdom of God on earth. All these, then, are analogical subjects, and it is logical for Paul to treat two of them together, since each one reflects on the other.

The second reason for Paul's pattern of composition is that it is modeled after an Old Testament method of composition. Drawing ideas and materials from A. C. Charity's Events and Their Afterlife, Jon noted that some Old Testament prophets used the merging of analogical past, near past and future events or situations in the present to stimulate spiritual change in the reader. The most evoked event was the Exodus, where the Jews were compelled to either accept or reject God's Will. The future event that was contrasted with the Exodus was the Judgement, where spiritual life or death would be decided. This promise from Isaiah 11:11-15 is also germane to a parallel future event: "Yahweh will extend his hand . . . and there will be a highway from Assyria for the remnant which is left of his people, as there was for Israel when they came up from the land of Egypt." Both Old Testament scripture and rituals impinge analogical past and future events on the present to create moments of heightened feeling that motivate the individual to obey God and strive for spiritual perfections, instead of living solely on a natural plane.

Paul follows this pattern in I Corinthians 15 by invoking figures who made past spiritual decisions (Adam failed, while Christ succeeded) between two eschatological moments (future events — the afterlife and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth). That this is to have a beneficial spiritual impact on the reader is made explicit by these lines: "Make no mistake: 'bad company is the ruin of a good character.' Come back to a sober and upright life and leave your sinful ways." (I Corinthians 15 :33-34)

Some criticisms were made by the study group. It was pointed out that A.C. Charity's views on

“primitive religions” were accepted too readily by the speaker and were superflous to the main thrust of the talk. Furthermore, it was suggested that ritual and scripture have other roles than the one discussed. There was also some disagreement over how much Judaism emphasised as a future event the coming of the Lord of Hosts and the establishment of an earthly righteous kingdom.

Back to the Basics Dept.: Over the weeks since these classes began last november we’ve picked up a good many new names on the mailing list (more about that below) . So, we thought it would be a good idea to restate for those who just joined us (hello out there) that our Baha’i study group meets every other week (more or less) to take on various topics. In recent meetings we have pondered and argued about myth and ritual in the Baha’i Faith (both exist, though many Baha’is would heatedly deny this), the effects of religion on personality and we have undertaken a critical analysis of an article in a recent “World Order” magazine by Denis MacEoin, a British Baha’i scholar, writing on “The Concept of Nation in Islam”. And, we have traced, using non-Baha’i sources, the fate of a band of covenant breakers in Akka (would you believe . . . they opened a used camel lot in Qatar? would you believe it was a falafel stand in Islamabad? No? Well, then, how about a pizzaburger joint in Fresno?)

With so many new faces showing up and new names on the mailing list , it ought to be restated that the approach of the class is academic and intellectual, in the best sense of those terms. We hope to help dispel some of the all-too-common bits of misinformation about the Baha’i Faith perpetrated by (one assumes) well-meaning but poorely deepened Baha’is. We go about our task in no organized, nor are we crusaders . We expect those who attend the classes (and everyone who can is encouraged to do so) to prepare topics for discussion, and this will involve some research.

There are only a few groundrules to our discussions: (1) No topics are taboo. We’ve thrashed out covenant breaking and its implications and its causes.We’ve wondered aloud about whether certain passages in the Kitab-i-Aqdas are sexist. In short, there are no questions which cannot be expressed openly and bluntly. (2) No one’s commitment to the Baha’i Faith can be questioned. We enter these classes as Baha’is with a common commitment to its beliefs which is above challenge or suspicion. Statements made and positions taken are done so in good faith. We may be wrong — indeed, expect to be in error on occasion — but no one is to be considered subversive for taking an unpopular or offbeat

stance. (3) Ideas and viewpoints inevitably will differ, and ought to. All those who present papers should expect that their ideas will be challenged and ought to be ready to support them with evidence acceptable to others.

Last time we held an impromptu analysis of how the classes have been going so far and seemed to agree they were more informal and less radical than at the beginning. But perhaps compensating for this is the fact that we have aggressively attacked old concepts and, along the way generated, an excitement about deepening that makes the old style pass-the-book-around class seem Neanderthal by comparison. There are still some rough spots. Too often those who attend the classes find themselves in the position of having to react to someone else's paper without having any familiarity with the subject matter. That puts everyone at a disadvantage. We are trying to make future discussions include suggested reading s to help the listeners understand the intent of each topic.

Speaking of topics we are canvassing for a volunteer to present one. Class members thought it was time we had a discussion and review of the almost seven-year period when the Baha'i Faith was without official leadership. From November, 1957, when Shoghi Effendi died, until April, 1963, when the first Universal House of Justice was elected, the Baha'i Faith passed through one of its most critical periods. How the upper level leadership functioned and an analysis of what happened, and why, is something we like to hear about. Any takers? If so, contact Tony Lee.

Nuts and Bolts Dept. : ok, gang, we got problems. Our mailing list is now up to 40+ names and the expense of it all has devolved on Tony like a 253-pound lady plopping down for a picnic lunch. Those who have atteneded the classes in person have kicked in some money. It hasn't been nearly enough, and its unfair to depend on them. The duplication and mailing costs of these summaries come to about $20 per issue. Class members decided, after discussing the matter, to charge for these letters. So, it will now cost you $1 per month to remain on the mailing list. That should offset the cost of sending these out. We hate to sound ruthless, but those who do not pay (and mail your money; checks, no cash please, to Tony Lee, whose address appears at the beginning of this missive) will be dropped from the subscriber list. EXCEPTION: the mailing fee will NOT apply to anyone on the list who resides outside of the continental United States. Persons living overseas who reveive these summaries will continue to be subsidized. The rest of us can consider that an inducement to go pioneering.

NEXT MEETING: will take place (God willing, and the [Ed. best estimate of word:] crik don't rise) at 11 am on Saturday, Feb. 5, 1977. Location: the palatial realms and sumptuous delights of Dinny and Mandy Gronich [Ed. personal home address and phone number follows]. Dinny urges all those planning to attend to consult a map beforehand. He tried to explain how to get there, but wound up mumbling "Actually, you can't get there from here." Very reassuring. Mark your calendars and remember the time and location. Bonnie Barnes was to have presented her paper on "A Baha'i Theory of Personality", but requested an extention of time. So, instead Tony Lee will review the relation of the Faith to politics. We talked about this some at the last meeting and discovered there is a lot of cofusion about this point. For instance, one class member told how she was instructed by a local assembly where she used to drop out of the local National Organization of Women (NOW) chapter in which she was a member. The assembly members thought that NOW qualified as a political organization. They were wrong; it doesn't. Tony suggest that everyone read the relevant passages about politics in the World Order of Baha'u'llah, pp.64-65 and whatever might apply to the topic which appears in Baha'i Administration. Bonnie Barnes' presentation will be re-scheduled for a future class. The next meeting. . . uh. . .that is, the meeting after the next one will take place at 2 pm Sunday, Feb. 20, 1977 at Jon and Chris Hendershot's [Ed. personal address follows]. Greg Wahlstrom will present a paper on the calamity. Passports, prayer books, Geiger counters and flame-proof attire are advised.

[END DOCUMENT]

Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

LA Study Class Newsletter [#9]

My notes:

This edition of the LA study class newsletter deals with a very interesting and controversial topic: politics. Some Baha´is believe that it is to be avoided like the plague, not discussed, not contemplated and certainly not engaged in. Others take a more nuanced approach from a different understanding of the Writings of the Faith. Of course, the corollary (of whichever argument you prefer) is the shape of the future world commonwealth: will it be

a theocracy, with the institutions acting as the government? or will there be separation of church and state, the way it is in many countries today? or maybe it will be somewhere in between perhaps?

In a fascinating way, this presents a paradox. Almost always, the same misinformed Baha'is who interpret the Writings to mean avoiding any and all political activities, are the same who believe in theocracy (that the Baha'i administration will one day supplant the local (LSA), national (NSA) and worldwide (UHJ) governments. I´m not really sure how they ever untie their noodle after doing that sort of mental gymnastics

And surprising (or simply forgotten) to most Baha´is is that Abdu´l-Baha actually encouraged Baha´is during His time to run for and hold political office. I believe it was for the Iranian parliament at that time (or a similar body if not that exactly). Basically, Abdu´l-Baha gave guidance and advice to individual Baha´is to represent the well being of their society while not engaging in partisan political games. And many did in fact run for and hold political office.

Of course, this topic has been a very touchy one even from the beginning of the Babi Faith. At that time, early Babis would sometimes declare, while travel teaching in new cities and territories, that all the wealth, properties and governing authority there now belonged to the Bab. Not surprisingly, some mistook this as a politically subversive agenda rather than a spiritual message. The misunderstandings continued with Baha´u´llah and Abdu´l-Baha. They were maligned by their enemies with the false charges that they were interested in ¨taking over¨. They each painstakingly repeated over and over again that this was not ever their wish, but rather that their goal was the betterment of mankind through God´s message for today.

And indeed, today it would be false to say that the Baha´i Faith is not active politically. We have had a very active and successful UN office in NY for many years. Mainly they have been drawing the world´s attention to the atrocious manner in which the IRI treats Baha´is. There have also been some isolated incidents of more explicit involvement. For example the case of an NSA who has lobbied, along with other religious groups of their country, against proposed same sex legislation. Is this not involvement in politics?

Finally, the newsletter discusses the nature of deepening in the Baha´i Faith. This is a very important matter as most, if not all of these little misunderstandings and erroneously held

beliefs, are a result of ignorance and apathy. Most Baha´is don´t really bother to deepen in the Writings, to ask difficult questions, or to try to then answer them. Unfortunately, this sad state of affairs has gotten much worse with the systematic and regimented Ruhi training course which is nothing more than colour by number deepening.

Before proceeding, you might also want to read the introduction to the LA study class, here.

On with the 70´s show . . .

[START DOCUMENT]
[Ed. personal home address]
February 10, 1977
Dear Baha'i Friends:

The class met again on Saturday, Feb 5th in the lavishly furnished apartments of Dinny and Mandy Gronich of Studio City. The presentation was given by Tony Lee, and as advertised, covered the Baha'i attitude towards politics. Tony passed around purple dittoed copies of a four page compilation on the subject for the dozen or so who attended. (A copy of this compilation should be enclosed in this mailing.) He emphasized that the compilation was not complete, that the quotes were not properly checked, that it had lots of typos, etc. So use it only as a study guide, not as a true source.

Tony began by noting that the Baha'i teachings on politics are largely misunderstood. Again, "fireside information" came under attack. A great many believers apply the well-known prohibition against non-interference in "politics" to virtually any organization standing outside of our own Administrative Order. It is common to hear the catch all phrase "non-participation in politics" used as a justification for not reading newspapers, not voting in national elections, being grossly ignorant of current events, being indifferent to the welfare of the nation, or even being openly contemptuous of those who aren't. The prevailing view (at least in this area) is that since Baha'is must not have anything to do with politics, they may not be politically concerned or take any part in the affairs of the state. Tony maintained that this is a gross distortion of the correct Baha'i view. The Writings repeatedly urge the believers to remain politically concerned and to actively work for the betterment of their respective governments – without becoming entangled in partisan politics or in struggles for political power.

At this point, it would be a good idea to stop reading this letter and spend some time looking over the quotations.

You'll notice that the various quotations seem to be confusing, even contradictory. Tony explained that he had deliberately chosen the quotes to set up a kind of 'debate' within Writings themselves – some quotes urging Baha'is to withdraw from the world and its affairs, others urging us to work in the world for the betterment of our nation, and of mankind. Tony proposed an interesting explanation for the apparent contradictions, one which was not accepted by everyone however. He claimed that the word "politics" is used in two different ways in the Writings. That is, that it has two different definitions. One definition is: The affairs of government. Baha'is are not forbidden to become involved in the affairs of the governments, indeed they are urged to do so. The other definition is: The struggle for power within the state or government. This is the politics (the partisan, factionalized, and destructive politics) from which Baha'is must strictly refrain.

Tony drew particular attention to the quotation from Shoghi Effendi (through his secretary) which made it clear that Baha'is may participate in demonstrations, and seemed to imply that they are morally obligated to do so when some basic principle is at stake (p.3) . He also emphasized the quotations of the Guardian and the House of Justice which say that Baha'is should demonstrate their love of country by working through "the administrative channels" of government. This is the politics of "the right type" mentioned by Abdu'l-Baha. Terry noted, however, that though Baha'is are not forbidden to become involved in this type of "politics", it may not always be wise for them to do so (especially when a highly controversial issue is involved). In such cases as this, the Institutions of the Faith may ask Baha'is to withdraw, for the protection of the Cause.

Taking this bifurcated approach, Tony argued that individual Baha'is may not take part in politics when it involves the partisan, factionalized struggle for power in a state (Democrat vs. Republican, Labor vs. Conservative, Socialist vs. Fascist, etc.). But, the believers are encouraged to take an active role in the affairs of the state. So, that side of politics dealing with the legislative decision-making process is permissible. It is under this heading that, for example, Baha'is vote in elections. Voting is, in itself, a political act.

Tony also drew a distinction between what individual Baha'is may do and what the administrative institutions of the Faith may do. While Baha'is are encouraged to take a role in political affairs, the institutions are strictly forbidden from doing so, he asserted.

Administrative institutions are not to discuss politics nor become in any way [Ed. involved] in the questions of the day. Institutions, such as local assemblies, are concerned with the welfare of mankind, but not with the various political schemes designed to affect that welfare.

There was some disagreement to this. It was argued that individual Baha'is are as much forbidden to enter the area of governmental concern and controversial questions as the administrative bodies are. However, just where this approach would leave the Baha'i Faith and an issue such as , civil rights, was not made clear.

Some of the quotations, especially those cited from Promulgation of Universal Peace, touched off an uproar among class members and the summary above is a good deal more lucid than our discussion was. We got sidetracked several times and the confusion indicates this question is not nearly so simple as had been imagined. Clearly, it is not a cut and dried issue. When does a social issue become a partisan political one? It all depends on circumstances. Although our discussion was lively, we reached no definite conclusions and wound up unreconciled on this difficult topic.

Identity Crisit Dept.: Almost from the beginning of these classes there has existed a difference of opinion over what and why they ought to be about. That division surfaced on the last session and we spent almost as much time bashing away at it as we did in discussion the day's topic. Here, in summary, is the root of the problem. A few class members want our sessions to be geared more toward productive activity, viz., producing what might be called work papers, or even articles destined for "World Order" [Ed. a Baha'i magazine] on various aspects of the Faith. Others argue that the classes are not non-productive if nothing concrete comes out of them; they are productive if those who attend (and presumably read these summaries) learn something.

But there remains an air of tension between the "academic" faction and those who favor a more social, personal and experience-oriented approach. The emergence of this conflict led to a discussion of the nature of deepening classes and why they are so universally dreary and boring. Many Baha'is who attend classes approach the topic of discussion equally ignorant. Let us suppose the class in on the Kitab-i-Iqan. Chances are those in attendance have not read the book or not very thoroughly, at any rate. (They would argue that is what they come to class to do, but that's another story.) With everyone equally disadvantaged, the only real option is to pass the book around and read aloud from it by turns. We've all

been through that and regard it with all the affection of the Hong Kong flu. Once book passing is the order of the day, people become afraid to comment overmuch of what is being read. We Baha'is have it drummed into us that no individual is an authority nor has interpretive rights. That's all true, but it works against discussion about what Baha'u'llah meant by a certain allusion or what a bit of symbolism might stand for. Without a teacher who has a lot of knowledge about a topic, "study classes" quickly bog down into oral elocution sessions.

There are other problems with deepening. One class member said the more deepened he became in the Faith, the less able he felt he could write or talk about it. It's a kind of quirky religious state of being spiritually muscle bound. Some Baha'is deepen more and teach less. The problem is, the more they know, the more they feel they must explain. Soon, a fireside has evolved into a semi-academic discussion and not a summary of Baha'i beliefs designed to encourage Baha'i non-Baha'is to begin their own independent investigation of Baha'u'llah.

By this point, we were fully immersed in verbalizing our concerns and frustrations about being Baha'is. One class member said we ought to study the relation between belief and scientific inquiry, arguing these ought to be complimentary, not contradictory. Another person asserted the basic trouble with Baha'is is not that it has been tried and found wanting, but that it has been found difficult and demanding, and therefore never really tried. And so it went. We finally patched over our differences with a compromise solution.

As Tony suggested, we agreed to ask Mr. Kazem Kazemzadeh to talk to the class about the Baha'i community of Ishqabad [Ed. alternate spelling: Ashkhabad] . In brief, this community was established in pre-revolutionary Russia and flourished. Ishqabad is the site of the first Baha'i House of Worship anywhere in the world. In a step-by-step approach, the Soviet authorities clamped down on Baha'i activities, ultimately, seizing the temple and outlawing Baha'i religious activities.

Mr. Kazemzadeh, we understand, served on the local assembly of Ishqabad and so is what historians would droll over as a "primary source". Our plan is to invite him to address the class at least once, and maybe two or three times, if he is willing, about the Baha'i community of Ishqabad. That community had a number of unique qualities. For example, it was probably the only major Baha'i community to exist in relative freedom in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Baha'i communities existed elsewhere, of course. But, for the

most part, their roots where in Muslim countries (Iran, predominantly) where the Baha'i Faith suffered under various states of repression. Ishqabad also underwent the unhappy fate of drawing the focus of Communist persecution. How that worked, what the local assembly did in response to it and just what happened in Ishqabad are all questions which we hope to have Mr. Kazemzadeh answer.

The class on Ishqabad is set for 3 pm, Sunday, March 6, at Tony's apartment [Ed. private home address]. Mr. Kazemzadeh will discuss his personal recollections of the Baha'i community of Ishqabad. All class members planning to attend are urged to read about the city and the House of Worship there by consulting back volumes of "Baha'i World". The success of this class will, in large measure, depend on the information elicited from Mr. Kazemzadeh. If you plan to attend, please prepare questions to ask him. In line with this special event, Bonnie Barnes' class on "A Baha'i Theory of Personality" will be postponed to a future class meeting.

Gentle Reminder Dept.: For those of you on our mailing list who have not already done so, please send Tony $1 per month to offset the photocopying and mailing costs of this effuvia. We're not using the money to set up a slush fund. Honest. We regret to write this, but those who do not send in their money will be dropped from the list. HOWEVER, this reminder does NOT apply to anyone on the list who resides outside the United States. Overseas readers will continue to receive these paltry offerings free. No, no, don't grovel in gratitude, it's just part of the service.

Hart Times Dept.: Okay, gang, we need volunteers to make presentations to the class. The success of the classes depends on the willingness of its participants to undertake research and present topics near and dear to our heaving bosoms. Without that, ain't no classes. Don't just sit there reading this, volunteer, dagnabit.

NEXT CLASS: Will be at 12:30 pm on Saturday, February 19th. Location: the seaside retreat of Jon and Chris Hendershot [Ed. personal phone and address follows]. Greg Wahlstrom will usher in the calamity for us (would you believe germ warfare? No? How about squirt guns at point-blank range?)

[Ed. the compilation prepared for the above class re politics follows]

THE PUZZLE OF POLITICS: Where do ya stand?

From the Writings of Baha'u'llah:

That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race. The Great Being saith: Blessed and happy is he that ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth. In another passage He hath proclaimed: It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.

Gleanings p.250

The All-Knowing Physician hath His finger on the pulse of mankind. He perceiveth the disease, and prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the remedy. Every age hath its own problem, and every soul its particular aspiration. The remedy the world needeth in its present-day afflictions can never be the same as that which a subsequent age may require. Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.

Baha'i World Faith p.36
[Ed. also Gleanings p.213]

. . . Forbear ye from concerning yourselves with the affairs of this world and all that pertaineth unto it, or from meddling with the activities of those who are its outward leaders. The one true God, exalted be His glory, hath bestowed the government of the earth upon the kings. To none is given the right to act in any manner that would run counter to the considered views of them who are in authority. That which He hath reserved for Himself are the cities of men's hearts; and of these the loved ones of Him Who is the Sovereign Truth are, in this Day, as the keys. . .

Gleanings p.241

From the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha:

You can best serve your country, if you strive, in your capacity as a citizen of the world, to assist in the eventual application of the principle of federalism underlying the government of your own country to the relationships now existing between the peoples and nations of the world.

quoted in World Order of Baha'u'llah p.37

The Baha'iss must not engage in political movements which lead to sedition. They must interest themselves in movements which conduce to law and order. In Persia at the present time the Baha'iss have no part in the revolutionary upheavals which have terminated in lawlessness and rebellion. Nevertheless, a Baha'is may hold a political office and be interested in politics of the right type. Ministers, state officials and governor-generals in Persia are Baha'iss, and there are many other Baha'iss holding governmental positions; but nowhere throughout the world should the followers of Bah??'u'll??h be engaged in seditious movements. For example, if there should be an uprising here in America having for its purpose the establishment of a despotic government, the Baha'iss should not be connected with it.

Promulgation of Universal Peace, Vol. II p.233
[Ed. in recent editions, p.238]

O ye beloved of the Lord! It is incumbent upon you to be submissive to all monarchs that are just and to show your fidelity to every righteous king. Serve ye the sovereigns of the world with utmost truthfulness and loyalty. Show obedience unto them and be their well-wishers. Without their leave and permission do not meddle with political affairs, for disloyalty to the just sovereign is disloyalty to God Himself.

The Will and Testament of Abdu'l-Baha, p.15

IX.—The ninth principle of Bah??'u'll??h is: That Religion should not concern itself with Political Questions. Religion is concerned with things of the spirit, politics with things of the world. Religion has to work with the world of thought, whilst the field of politics lies with the world of external conditions.

Paris Talks, p.132-133

He has ordained and established the House of Justice which is endowed with a political as well as a religious function, the consummate union and blending of church and state. . .

Promulgation of Universal Peace, Vol. II p.452
[Ed. in recent publications, p.455]

. . . also the irrefutable command that the Blessed Perfection hath given in Tablets that the believers must obey the kings with the utmost sincerity and fidelity, and He hath forbidden

them to interfere at all with political problems. He hath even prohibited the believers from discussing political affairs.

Tablets of Abdu'l-Baha, p.498

O thou servant of Baha'! Thou hast asked regarding the political affairs. In the United States it is necessary that the citizens shall take part in elections. This is a necessary matter and no excuse from it is possible. My object in telling the believers that they should not interfere in the affairs of government is this: That they should not make any trouble and that they should not move against the opinion of the government, but obedience to the laws and the administration of the commonwealth is necessary. Now, as the government of America is a republican form of government, it is necessary that all the citizens shall take part in the elections of officers and take part in the affairs of the republic.

Tablets of Abdu'l-Baha, p.342-3

From the works of Shoghi Effendi:

Let him also attempt to devise such methods as association with clubs, exhibitions, and societies, lectures on subjects akin to the teachings and ideals of his Cause such as temperance, morality, social welfare, religious and racial tolerance, economic cooperation, Isl??m, and Comparative Religion, or participation in social, cultural, humanitarian, charitable, and educational organizations and enterprises which, while safeguarding the integrity of his Faith, will open up to him a multitude of ways and means whereby he can enlist successively the sympathy, the support, and ultimately the allegiance of those with whom he comes in contact.

Advent of Divine Justice, p.43
[Ed. in recent editions, p.51]

That Baha'is may take part in demonstrations was made clear by Shoghi Effendi when a number of Baha'i students at the University of Chicago joined a protest against racial prejudice and carried a placard with the word "Baha'i" on it. Mr. Ellsworth Blackwell asked the Guardian: Is there anything wrong with the protesting of Baha'i student groups against racial prejudice along with other student organizations? The beloved Guardian replied through his secretary (January 1948) : He does not see any objection to Baha'i students taking part as Baha'is in a protest such as that mentioned in the clipping. On the

contrary, he does not see how they could remain indifferent when fellow students were voicing our own Baha'i attitude on such a vital issue and one we feel so strongly about.

Human Rights and the Baha'i Faith (The NSA of the USA) Baha'i World insert 6/64
[Ed. I haven't found this - either in electronic or hardcopy format - but find it fascinating]

Let them refrain from associating themselves, whether by word or by deed, with the political pursuits of their respective nations, with the policies of their governments and the schemes and programs of parties and factions. In such controversies they should assign no blame, take no side, further no design, and identify themselves with no system prejudicial to the best interests of that world-wide Fellowship which it is their aim to guard and foster. Let them beware lest they allow themselves to become the tools of unscrupulous politicians, or to be entrapped by the treacherous devices of the plotters and the perfidious among their countrymen. Let them so shape their lives and regulate their conduct that no charge of secrecy, of fraud, of bribery or of intimidation may, however ill-founded, be brought against them. Let them rise above all particularism and partisanship, above the vain disputes, the petty calculations, the transient passions that agitate the face, and engage the attention, of a changing world. It is their duty to strive to distinguish, 65 as clearly as they possibly can, and if needed with the aid of their elected representatives, such posts and functions as are either diplomatic or political from those that are purely administrative in character, and which under no circumstances are affected by the changes and chances that political activities and party government, in every land, must necessarily involve. Let them affirm their unyielding determination to stand, firmly and unreservedly, for the way of Bah??'u'll??h, to avoid the entanglements and bickerings inseparable from the pursuits of the politician, and to become worthy agencies of that Divine Polity which incarnates God's immutable Purpose for all men.
It should be made unmistakably clear that such an attitude implies neither the slightest indifference to the cause and interests of their own country, nor involves any insubordination on their part to the authority of recognized and established governments. Nor does it constitute a repudiation of their sacred obligation to promote, in the most effective manner, the best interests of their government and people.

World Order of Baha'u'llah, p.64-5

We should—every one of us—remain aloof, in heart and in mind, in words and in deeds, from the political affairs and disputes of the Nations and of Governments. We should keep

ourselves away from such thoughts. We should have no political connection with any of the parties and should join no faction of these different and warring sects. Absolute impartiality in the matter of political parties should be shown by words and by deeds, and the love of the whole humanity, whether a Government or a nation, which is the basic teaching of Bah??'u'll??h, should also be shown by words and by deeds…

Directives from the Guardian, p.56-7

The cardinal principle which we must follow … is obedience to the government prevailing in any land in which we reside…. We see therefore that we must do two things—Shun politics like the plague, and be obedient to the Government in power in the place where we reside… We must obey in all cases except where a spiritual principle is involved, such as denying our Faith. For these spiritual principles we must be willing to die.

Directives from the Guardian, p.57

Such a rectitude of conduct must . . . characterize the attitude of every loyal believer towards nonacceptance of political posts, nonidentification with political parties, nonparticipation in political controversies, and nonmembership in political organizations and ecclesiastical institutions.

Advent of Divine Justice, p. 22
[Ed. in recent editions, p.26]

Letters of the Universal House of Justice:

Because love for our fellowmen and anguish at their plight are essential parts of a true Baha'i's life, we are continually drawn to do what we can to help them. It is vitally important that we do so whenever the occasion presents itself, for our actions must say the same thing as our words — but this compassion for our fellows must not be allowed to divert our energies into channels which are ultimately doomed to failure, causing us to neglect the most important and fundamental work of all.

UHJ Messages 1963-1986, p.126
[Ed. in the 1982 edition see pp. 24, 29-33]

[END DOCUMENT]

Links:

The original scanned documents can be found here.

Lessons of the Catholic Church Sex Abuse Scandal

I'm sure that everyone is by now aware of the sex abuse scandal plaguing the Catholic church. What was once talked about in hushed tones, if at all, is now openly and hotly debated in the media and the pews.

The image and reputation of the Vatican and the Catholic church lies in tatters as evidence has come to light that there was a systematic and methodical process in place to protect the Church and priests instead of protecting the innocent and helpless victims of the heinous crimes being perpetrated.

Many are even pointing out that Ratzinger's nomination was motivated by the legal trial in the US. Of course, now in his position as the Pope, he claimed immunity from appearing as a witness.

The effect of this has been nothing short of devastating for the Church, especially in the Pope's home country of Germany.

As Hitchens points out, the Vatican's claim of statehood hangs on the flimsiest thread, having been originally created out of thin air by the Italian fascist dictator Mussolini to cement his ties with the Catholic church and gain its support.

Hitchens, by the way, participated in a spirited debate as part of the Intelligence Squared forum on the question of whether the Catholic church is a force for good:

Part 1, Part 2, Part 3, Part 4, Part 5.

While Hitchens is up to his usual standard of eloquence, I found Fry's articulate arguments to be completely devastating. And they clearly had the intended effect as the vast majority

of the undecided switched to his side as did a great many of those that had initially agreed that the Catholic Church is a force for good.

For those with a pitch black sense of humor, here is Louis CK learning about the Catholic church – WARNING! Video contains harsh language and suggestive imagery. But the solitary tear running down CK's cheek makes it worthwhile.

Baha'i Catholic blog is surprisingly quiet but then again, there hasn't been an update since late last year.

What we have here is an institution that has lost its way and rather than existing to serve a higher purpose, it merely exists to prolong its own existence and further its own pomp and grandeur.

This is a danger that can befall any organization. Those which purport to be divinely guide and free from error are especially susceptible because those within the institution believe that theirs is a heavenly task which must be protected at all costs and those outside often dare not question or criticize it.

It is all too easy to overlook the fact that the Church has been protected by the law. For many decades when victims went to the police and to the public prosecutor, no action was taken simply because the perpetrator was the Church and it was considered sacrosanct.

The Baha'i Faith has its own, albeit small, share of these sort of public scandals. In the 1990′s Dr. Hossain Danesh, a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Canada (and a long time secretary of the body – from 1985 to 1989) lost the right to practice psychiatry as a result of charges of sexual abuse brought forward by a handful of his former patients.

Far from being sanctioned and sent away in shameful seclusion he was soon given a plum job at the new Baha'i Landegg university in Switzerland. He then proceeded to run that institution into the ground. The university closed its doors in 2005.

Recently Danesh's "old boy" network connections at the NSA got him a heavily promoted gig in Canada. With the full backing of the national Baha'i institution, he conducted a $50/ person seminar on "Healthy Marriage and Family Life". Here is a promotional flyer for one of the many planned seminars:

They key element in this is to ask whether Danesh would be able to slink back to Canada and receive such a warm welcome had he not been a long-standing member of the NSA. Would the NSA have gone out of its way to promote the workshop of a regular Baha'i who had a checkered past?

The other question is why other Baha'is who are infinitely more qualified in this field and have a stainless reputation are not being given the same platform? The only distinction is the personal connections that Danesh made through his many years of membership on the NSA. This is what leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. Rather than being loyal to virtues and principles, the NSA has betrayed itself as being loyal to personal connections.

There was another scandal a few years ago involving a young Baha'i in the developing world who alleged that she was being sexually abused by her father. It turned out that her father was a member of the country's NSA (and its chairperson). Instead of considering her physical and mental health as the highest priority, the institutions instead focused on how to mitigate any fallout this might have on the Baha'i administration and the image and reputation of the same.

Obviously we cannot expect such institutions to police themselves. There is no reason whatsoever why similar allegations which involve the Catholic church or the Baha'i administration must be submitted to them for internal deliberation. Refreshingly enough, from what I've read of guidance from Baha'i institutions, they are in agreement with this and encourage victims to approach the proper authorities and seek legal recourse through appropriate channels. The best panacea for such tragic crimes remains transparency and public scrutiny.

“Let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind”

one-world-one-people

Recently I wrote a comment here which was censored.

I’ll leave it for others to ponder the irony of a website that bemoans the ill treatment of Baha’is in Iran and has as its purpose the protection of their basic human rights… and then uses tactics which the IRI has used against Baha’is to silence them.

Basically the comment was that while what this fellow Baha’i was going through was horrible, illegal, and reprehensible; his pride in being Iranian (which he repeats several times in strong language) is in conflict with what Baha’u’llah said about not glorying in being a citizen of a specific country but being a member of humanity.

These arbitrary line we draw on maps mean nothing. We are one people, one creation, with one God. That is the animating force behind the Baha’i revelation. It is the single most powerful message that we as Baha’is have to convey.

But sadly, I’ve noticed this tendency in other Baha’is from Iran to boast about being Iranian.

It is almost as if they are overcompensating for the false accusations lobbed against them by the IRI. Accusations of being spies or agents of a foreign power. They so wish to show their pride at being Iranian and of loving their “homeland” that they are blinded to one of the most powerful teachings of their own Faith.

It might also be that they take pride in being Iranian because Iran is the “Cradle of the Faith” and is promised a glorious future in Baha’i Writings.

So what? So is the USA. Equally blessed is every country and place “where mention of God is made and His praise glorified”. To single out one country and to say that it is hallowed above others is in direct conflict with Baha’i teachings. And it is a very dumb reason for Baha’is who are persecuted to decide to remain in Iran to continue to be

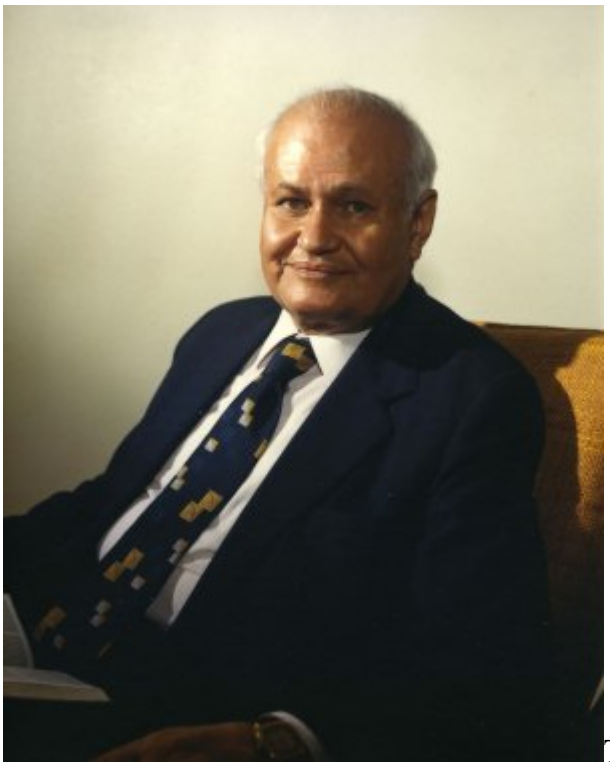
persecuted when they have the ability to simply leave and lead free, productive lives elsewhere.

Even if the future of Iran is indeed glorious, why would any rational human being decide to keep themselves and their family in harms way? of what possible value is self inflicted martyrdom and suffering? where does the line blur between persecution and a victim mentality?

If your hand is in the fire, would you keep it there because you know that eventually the fire will burn itself out and be later replaced by flowers many months from now?

How utterly ignorant and lamentable to mistake self-flagellation for piety, to mistake self chosen suffering for God's teachings of love and oneness.

Letter from Dr. Varqa

 This letter from the Hand of The Cause of God (the last living person designated as such by Shoghi Effendi), Dr. Ali-Mohammad Varqa was sent to the members of a LSA in England.

To the beloved participants in the national Baha'i festival held in the Yorkshire seaside resort of Scarborough, United Kingdom

Dearly loved Friends,

While you are gathered together to celebrate this wonderful festival sponsored by your esteemed National Spiritual Assembly, I am greatly honoured to convey to you this message of love and fellowship, supplicating that the Blessed Beauty may pour His confirmations and limitless bounties upon you and assist you to harvest excellent fruits from this historic gathering.

The involvement of the Baha'i friends in various Baha'i activities is an unparalleled bounty bestowed on them, attracting divine confirmations and illuminating the path of servitude to the Cause of God.

Surely through your participation in this memorable festival and through your commitment to engage actively in discharging your sacred responsibilities as a Baha'i, you will perceive the sensitivity of this crucial period of our time, pregnant with disorder and perplexity throughout the planet, threatening the crumbling of the existing order worldwide, which according to our Holy Writings has to be replaced by the emergence of a new world civilization based on harmony, fellowship, and love.

When we look at the prevailing circumstances of the world, we can easily discern that the dark clouds of chaos and confusion have covered most parts of the world. The horrific spectre of the world's agitation and turmoil whistles and swells and approaches with giant steps. Now is the time for us to recall once again the Words of the Blessed Beauty reflected in a Tablet revealed in honour of a prominent Baha'i of that time, Haji-Muhammad Ibrahim-i-Yazdi, translated into English by the Beloved Guardian. In this momentous Tablet, Baha'u'llah stated:

"The world is in travail, and its agitation waxeth day by day. Its face is turned towards waywardness and unbelief. Such shall be its plight, that to disclose it now would not be meet and seemly. Its perversity will long continue. And when the appointed hour is come, there shall suddenly appear that which shall cause the limbs of mankind to quake. Then, and only then, will the Divine Standard be unfurled, and the Nightingale of Paradise warble its melody."

A brief analysis of these words indicates:

1. The world is in turmoil and agitation and like a sick, infected body struggles for its cure and recovery. The great historical occurrences from the time of the Blessed Beauty until now, such as the upheaval of different nations; the bloody conflict between Russia and Japan in 1905; the two world wars followed by economic and social crises; the rise and fall of governments; the birth and death of philosophical and political doctrines, such as capitalism, socialism, communism, etc., bear witness to what Baha'u'llah has prophesied for this evolutionary process propelled by God.

2. This period of decline and perplexity will continue for some time, during which human society will experience the worst bewilderment and confusion, leading to the total collapse of the existing order. The general tendency of the world will incline towards materialism, disbelief, and anarchy to such an extent that the Blessed Beauty refrained from disclosing its full scale. But, the Beloved Guardian in his message of April 1957 has illustrated a tragic picture of this period that our generation has experienced in the course of the twentieth century and singled out some of its salient points:

"The violent derangement of the world's equilibrium; the trembling that will seize the limbs of mankind; the radical transformation of human society; the rolling up of the present-day Order; the fundamental changes affecting the structure of government; the weakening of the pillars of religion; the rise of dictatorships; the spread of tyranny; the fall of monarchies; the decline of the ecclesiastical institutions; the increase of anarchy and chaos; the extension and consolidation of the Movement of the Left; the fanning into flame of the smouldering fire of racial strife; the development of infernal engines of war; the burning of cities; the contamination of the atmosphere of the earth…"

And he emphasizes:

"….these stand out as the signs and portents that must either herald or accompany the retributive calamity which, as decreed by Him Who is the Judge and Redeemer of mankind, must, sooner or later, afflict a society which… has turned a deaf ear to the Voice of God's Messenger in this day…"

3. After this period of hardship and suffering which the Centre of the Covenant has qualified as unbearable for man, society will awaken gradually from its age-long heedlessness and apathy and take refuge under the tabernacle of unity and fellowship raised through the new world order presented by Baha'u'llah.

The shivering foundation of human society indicates that the last chance bestowed on man to change his way of life and free himself from the spider's web of materialism is fast running out. The time to fulfil our obligation to serve humanity has shortened and the process of decline and disintegration grows faster than we can imagine. The world is compelled to meet the calamities and disasters assailing it from every direction, threatening its existence.

Therefore, in reviewing the actual circumstances of the world and the occurrence of daily events seen in the mass media and remembering the warnings given on various occasions by the Holy Figures of our Faith, we have to appreciate the paramount importance of this destiny-making time in the history of mankind.

While the well-wishers, philosophers, leaders of thought, and governments fail to present effective guidelines for humanity, Baha'u'llah gave the privilege to His followers to rise and guide human society with His vivifying teachings and principles.

Under the guidance of our Supreme Body, the Universal House of Justice, tremendous opportunities to serve have been created. The sacrifice of the devoted martyrs, teachers, and servants of the Faith has paved the way to bring the curative Message of Baha'u'llah to every single soul. We have to arise with devotion and determination and step forward in the arena of teaching. We have to remember the extreme austerity of this time and ponder the words of the Beloved Guardian reflected in The Advent of Divine Justice:

"The field is indeed so immense, the period so critical, the Cause so great, the workers so few, the time so short, the privilege so priceless, that no follower of the Faith of Baha'u'llah, worthy to bear His name, can afford a moment's hesitation."

God bless you all.

With loving Baha'i greetings,

A. M. Varqa

William Hatcher's Letter to Yale University

A partial copy of this letter exists on the net, but this is the complete version:

Letter from William Hatcher to Dean Liston Pope
Yale University, Divinity School – May 21st, 1957

I am writing to inform you that, contrary to my previously expressed intentions, I will be unable to attend Yale Divinity School next fall. I do this with a feeling of grateful appreciation for your acceptance of my application and for your offer of a Grant-in-Aid of $400.00 which I accepted from you in my letter dated May 17, 1957. The reason for my decision not to enter Yale is wholly irrelevant to monetary considerations, and I would like to explain this to you.

Since accepting the Grant-in-Aid to Yale, I have become firmly convinced of the unanswerable truth of the Baha'i World Faith. During my four years as a student at Vanderbilt, I have been privileged to know and talk with some of the greatest leaders of Christianity in the United States and, to some extent, in the world. I have been in proximity, for the entire four year period, to Nels Ferre who, as you know, is one of the most creative theologians in Christianity today. The summer between my freshman and sophomore years I was fortunate enough to attend the full seventeen-day meeting to the Wold Council of Churches in Evanston, Illinois. There I was able to talk personally with some of the most dynamic spirits and the most creative thinkers the Christian world offers.

Not only have I been privileged to meet great thinkers and church leaders, but I have had the opportunity to engage in study adn thought on my own. I have become familiar with the history of Western thought, with the history of the Christian Church and contemporary thought, reading such philosophers as Soren Kierkegaard, Kal Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre, Richard Niebuhr, Nels Ferre, and Paul Tillich. Nor has my activity been solely intellectual. Last summer I served as part of "A Christian Ministry in the National Parks" at Crater Lake National Park in Oregon. I have done work in campus religious organizations and in the Church.

In all of my activity, I have found nothing which is in any way comparable to the Baha'i Revelation either in the dynamic qualities of the Spirit or in the satisfaction of the intellect. When one finds such deep and lasting satisfaction in an age so fraught with error and anxiety, he can do nothing else but follow it. Indeed, he would be a fool to do otherwise! I pray that I may be able to say, as other Baha'is have said, "and if something else comes along which is more satisfying than this, then I will follow it." This is indeed the spirit of truth.

The people of this age are asleep. They have been unable to discern the signs of the time. The greatest minds and the most sensitive spirits are those who testify the strongest of despair, for it is they who most keenly realize how close we are to the very brink of disaster. The only thing capable of saving man is God, God as He reveals Himself and His will for this age. God has indeed done this through Baha'u'llah (The Glory of God). Baha'u'llah proclaimed Himself in 1863 to be the Promised One so long awaited by men of all faiths and foretold in unmistakable terms by Jesus in the 24th chapter of Matthew. It is this very issue, the Second Coming of Christ, which has long been ignored by the whole of liberal Protestant Christendom and which was the cause of disunity and disagreement at the Evanston meeting.

I met Baha'is for the first time as a freshman in college. During these four years of search I, like almost every other Christian, refused to consider seriously the claims of Baha'u'llah as the Promised One. The truly frightening thing is that Christian leaders simply refuse even to consider the claims of Baha'i. They are willing to study for years the detailed aspects of the Bible, historical and contemporary theological literature, and the history of the Christian church; yet they refuse to consider even the possibility that the claims of Baha'u'llah might be true.

You most probably encountered an article in the April 10th issue of "The Christian Century" by Marcus Bach entitled, "Baha'i: A Second Look." "Christ and Baha'u'llah" and "The Promise of All Ages," both by Canon George Townshend, are excellent works on the subject.

The world is on the brink of disaster greater than it has ever known. Christians must wake up before it is too late. Each day which passes without this awakening will surely sink the Christian world deeper in despair and confusion. The words of Paul echo through the

centuries to this, the time of the Kingdom promised in Christ's own prayer; "How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?"

It is possible that in sharing my experience and my reason for deciding not to enter Yale some glint of interest in Baha'i will arise. It is with this very hope that I write.

The following is a prayer revealed by Baha'u'llah:

> O my God! O my God! Unite the hearts of Thy servants, and reveal to them Thy great purpose. May they follow Thy commandments and abide in Thy law. Help them, O God in their endeavour, and grant them strength to serve Thee. O God, leave them not to themselves, but guide their steps by the light of knowledge, and cheer their hearts by Thy love. Verily, Thou art their Helper and their Lord.

william_hatcher_small
William S. Hatcher
1935 – 2005

Little Known Fact: Baha'i Age of Consent

If you asked your average friendly neighborhood Baha'i about the age of consent in the Baha'i Faith, they would most probably say 15 years of age.

And that is true… for the most part. The *Kitab-i-Aqdas* and *Some Answered Questions* both mention the fifteenth year.

But if that was all there was to it, this wouldn't be another installment of "it's a little known fact"!

A recent article written by Sen McGlinn delves into the topic and explains why the age of consent for Baha'is is actually, 15, 14 and unknown (not yet set by the UHJ). Yes, all three.

Little Known Facts: The Supreme Institution?

It has been a while since we cracked open a case of "Little Known Facts…" but don't worry, this is a fresh batch.

If you are a Baha'i or have spent enough time around some recently, you may have heard the expression: "the Supreme body" or "the Supreme institution" at least a few times.

In current Baha'i vernacular, this refers to the Universal House of Justice. But where did it come from? and is it accurate? any why is it important to wonder about these questions?

During a recent discussion online at Talisman, the oldest continuous online Baha'i forum, the topic turned to the House of Justice and the quandary of how to distinguish if they are legislating or not. Within the discussion, as is now sadly becoming the norm, someone used the expression to refer to the UHJ.

Your humble scribe interjected:

> pardon the digression, but where did this habit of calling the UHJ as the "supreme body" or "supreme institution" come from?

> According to Shoghi Effendi, the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar, is "the crowning institution". Furthermore, Shoghi Effendi does on to describe the relationship between the Administrative Order and the Mashriq:
>
> "The seat round which its (referring to the AO) spiritual, its humanitarian and administrative activities will cluster are the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar and its Dependencies."

It was obvious to me that everyone seemed to have simply accepted this title. But what was less obvious was how legitimate it really was.

If we are speaking in generalities, from a rudimentary reading of the Writings about the Administrative Order, it would seem that the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar has a very focal place within the Baha'i community. One, around which, the administrative institutions cluster.

Unfortunately the institution of Mashriqu'l-Adhkhar is totally ignored in the current Baha'i culture. A severe oversight when you actually take the time to read about its importance in the Writings. This error will, I hope, be corrected in the future. But to stick to the topic at hand, why have Baha'is spontaneously started to give this generic title of "supreme body" to the House? and does it have any real significance?

I was delighted when Sen wrote a lengthy reply to my question. You can read it here at Sen's own blog. Here's an excerpt:

> This usage was not found in the 1960s or 1970s to my knowledge. I think the change in terms used for the UHJ is significant. I think that the shorter terms such as "the Supreme Body" are – usually – a way of indicating that the speaker asserts the UHJ's ideal supremacy over everything and everybody. Whether that is the intention or not, it will sound that way to hearers.
>
> The same sort of dynamics, an "inflation" of titles and claims, exist in all religious movements that I know of, from New Religious Movements to Eastern Orthodoxy and Catholicism, and Shiah and Sunni Islam. In all religions, there are minimisers and there are exaggerators, and there is an internal dynamic that favours the exaggerators, so that in the long term the metaphysical claims a religion makes and the titles it uses inflate.

> The dynamic that favours the exaggerators is that an exaggeration always appears more pious, even if technically wrong. And what is just "more pious" in this generation, is self-evident orthodoxy for the next. Those who want to seem more fervently pious then have to move up one step of hyperbole.

Another "little known fact", brought to you by Baha'i Rants, thanks to Sen. The Universal House of Justice is not the "Supreme body" nor the "Supreme institution".

Fine, you may say, but isn't this nitpicking or is this really important?

The reason such a distinction *is* truly important is that language is important. We use words to communicate ideas and concepts. Because of this connection to values, ideas and concepts, words vicariously have tremendous power.

The Guardian, along with the other central figures of the Faith, were wordsmiths and always used precise language – after all, that was their primary tool to act upon the world. How silly do we look if we insist on using a term that wasn't used by Baha'u'llah, Abdu'l-Baha, Shoghi Effendi, and neither used by the very institution the term refers to?

Finally, although words do have power, actions are immensely more powerful. If our intention is to show piety, we do ourselves and our communities a disservice if we merely use empty but exaggeratedly pious sounding words:

> ***The essence of faith is fewness of words and abundance of deeds; he whose words exceed his deeds, know verily his death is better than his life.***
> Baha'u'llah

No related posts.

Love: A Dialogue by Brendan Cook

BahaisOnline.net is currently BahaisOffline.net

Apparently someone decided to use a DDoS attack against it and force it to be taken down. I'm glad to report that this situation is only temporary. Very soon Steve's excellent site will be back up and dishing out off beat Baha'i news from around the world.

Until then, I'm going to do what I can to help out.

In that regard, here is the latest from Brendan Cook. It is a dialogue on love. Enjoy:

If you want to print it out and read it at your leisure, here is the printable format.

It is a summer day in the forests of the Canadian Northwest. Geron and Huios are sitting on the front porch of a small house built in a clearing among acres of poplar and spruce. They talk and look alike and it is clear they are father and son. Geron is greyer and bent slightly with age, but still looks much as he did when he was young. Beside them is a small portable CD player, with compact disc cases – The Times they are A-Changin', Another Side of Bob Dylan, Bringing it All Back Home – *scattered around it.*

Geron: (sings)
Oh the time will come up
When the winds will stop
And the breeze will cease to be breathin'.
Like the stillness in the wind
Before the hurricane begins,
The hour that the ship comes in.

Huios: Thrilling words. Funny to think they were written because Dylan was angry that someone wouldn't give him a hotel room.

Geron: You believe that? I've heard the story too, but I never took it seriously. And does it matter what he was thinking? For me and my friends that song was full of meaning – mystical, spiritual – it spoke to all of us. We didn't agree about the details, but we all had the same feeling. "The hour that the ship comes in" was the moment something wonderful would happen, something long-awaited and glorious. And we were sure it was coming soon. It was all tied up in the spirit of the times: I don't think you could imagine if you weren't there yourself.

Huios: Well, I think I can be excused. It's hard to know the "sixties firsthand when I wasn't born until nineteen seventy-five.

Geron: Yes, but it was an important time for anyone who lived through it. There was the war, and civil rights, and the protests on campus. And of course the music. But what I

remember most was the potential, the sense of what was possible. You could really believe that a better world was on the way. We knew it wouldn't be easy, understand. We knew that there were powerful forces at work against us: nationalism, materialism, ignorance, indifference. But we thought we could beat them if we fought long enough and hard enough, if we were willing to pay the price. Anything seemed possible if we really wanted it. It was a time when you could hear "the times they are a-changing" and hear a prophecy.

Huios: And you don't now?

Geron: Well, it's been forty years, and a lot of things haven't lived up to their promise.

Huios: Like the Baha'i Faith?

Geron: I don't see what's the use of talking about that. I've moved on. That was part of my life for a long time, but it's over now.

Huios: Is that it? It's over now!? I don't get it! How do you turn your back on something that was so important, such a meaningful part of your life? You were a Baha'i for all of thirty years; you fasted, prayed, and served on Assembly; you taught the Faith and you gave to the fund; but what matters most is that you believed, believed like no one I've known. Maybe every son thinks that about his father, but I thought that you would never change. You were my model of belief, your faith was like granite. And now I don't recognize you. It's as if that part of your life never happened. The Baha'i prayers used to be your lifeblood, and now you never open a prayerbook or recite any of the prayers you learned by heart, the same prayers you taught me when I was young. The words of Baha'u'llah, and Abdu'l-Baha were once so important to you, and now you never study them: for you they never existed.

Geron: Well I've moved on, that's all. I thought I knew what it meant to be a Baha'i for many years, but now it seems I didn't. The things you discovered in Toronto, all that we found on the internet: that settled it. When I signed my card, I thought I was joining something special, something different from all the religions that say they're right and everyone else is wrong. I thought I was joining a community that would allow perfect freedom of belief. I thought that I could read the writings for myself and no one could ever say my reading was mistaken. But it was all a show: they sold me a bill of goods. They say they're different, but underneath they're like everyone else. The institutions of the Faith think they can decide who is a Baha'i and who isn't: they can tell me I'm wrong if I don't

think they're infallible or if I say shunning has no place in modern religion. They think that they and they alone have the way and the truth and the light. They think they have everything to teach and nothing to learn from the other faiths of the world: just like the Mormons I studied with, or the Catholic priest who tried to teach me catechism when I was twelve. I entered the Baha'i Faith because I thought I was getting one thing, and I got something else instead. I was deceived, but they couldn't keep me. Once I found out that it wasn't free and open and different, I was gone.

Huios: But it feels strange to hear you talk like this. You have your own life, I know, but you were also an important part of mine: you were the one who raised me as a Baha'i. You were the one who taught me about religion. I remember being six years old and sitting in your lap as you would tell me about God and His Manifestations. You read me the stories of Mohammed, and Buddha, and the Bab and Baha'u'llah, and all the other Messengers. You told me about Abdu'l-Baha and how he loved me and prayed for me, and you taught me to say my first prayers so I could pray for him in return.

Geron: You remember all that?

Huios: Of course I do. And I remember all the songs you'd sing to me. Songs about the heroes of Fort Tabarsi, and Abdu'l Baha, and about being world citizens. You'd take your guitar and sing:

Glory not in this that you love your country:

Glory but in this that you love mankind.

You are the fruits of but one tree

And the leaves of but one branch.

Geron: And I loved to sing those songs to you. I loved my children very much – until you have kids of your own you'll never guess how much. And what I wanted more than anything was to raise you as world citizens. And why not? It was because of you that I found the Faith in the first place.

Huios: Me? That's a lot to attribute to a two-year-old.

Geron: Haven't I ever told you the story of what happened when you were born?

Huios: I think you have – a few times, actually. But go ahead. Let's hear it once more.

Geron: Have I really told it so often? I don't think so. And I never told it all the way through. But anyway, you've heard how I was interested in religion when I was younger – that's why I attended catechism – but my interest trailed off as I got older. I had a lot going on in my life that didn't give me much reason to believe in God. Going up to Canada to escape the draft, leaving school, thinking I might never come to back to the States to see my family: I was pretty bitter at the world and how it worked. And all the religions I'd looked at as a teenager, they really seemed the same to me. They would all say that they had the answers to any questions worth asking, and that everyone else was lost and misguided, or better yet on the straight road to Hell. My grandmother said prayers with me every night when I was little, but I knew that she loved me more than anything, and there was no love in any of these churches. So I stopped searching for religion for a while. And that's where you entered the story.

Huios: Well, I can't say it was intentional. Being born wasn't something I gave much thought.

Geron: Wait until you're a father and then you'll see. Having children changes you, changes you could never expect. We'd been married quite a few years before we had you, your mother and I, and I don't think I'd have wanted kids even then if she hadn't pushed me.

Huios: I think I heard her tell me that. She basically insisted it was time to start a family.

Geron: That's true. But it was a different matter when I saw you and held you for the first time. Then everything was different. You were so tiny that I could hold you in the crook of my arm: I can remember how you smelled and how you felt and how you looked up at me with a look of perfect trust.

Huios: You must have imagined that part. Babies that young can't focus their eyes on anything. I probably wasn't looking up at you so much as staring blankly.

Geron: Imagine it or not, that was what I felt. And with that feeling came an incredible rush of love, love like I never remembered feeling before in my life. I felt so much love towards the little baby in my arms it was almost intoxicating. The love seemed so strong that I tried to make sense of it, tried to understand where it was coming from. At first I

thought it was coming from me, that the love rose up from somewhere deep inside. But then, all at once, I knew that this wasn't true. The love wasn't coming from me, but through me. I seemed to be standing in a tunnel of light, surrounded by light and suffused by it until it was shining through me like the sun through a clear glass.

Huios: That sounds like an analogy Abdu'l-Baha might have used.

Geron: And that could be why I responded to the Baha'i writings. But that came after. All I knew then was that the love I felt flowing through me and bathing my newborn son didn't belong to me: I was only the vessel. And that changed how I saw the world within minutes. I knew, knew because I had experienced it, not read or been told, that the world of creation was alive with a love that was everywhere and shone through everyone and everything. That was when I decided to renew my religious journey. The love was so real that I knew I had to search and find and acknowledge the source.

Huios: And you thought that someone might be able to lead you closer to this source? An organized religion?

Geron: I'd had my doubts about religion before, but then I'd had my doubts about God, too. After you were born I gave everything a second look.

Huios: But you didn't become a Baha'i at once, or at least that's what I remember.

Geron: I didn't know about the Baha'is. First I had to work my way through the other religions.

Huios: And the Mormons?

Geron: I looked at them, but I saw how they operate. They were friendly and helpful, and they welcomed me into their homes. But it still felt like I was a number, a potential Mormon and not a person. And they proved it, too. When I wouldn't join, they lost interest in me.

Huios: And the Baha'is felt different?

Geron: It's not hard to tell a person who really cares about you from someone who just wants to convert you. The Baha'is really cared. But I'm getting ahead of myself. The point is that it didn't take me long to realize that this was something special.

Huios: How fast did you know you'd found what you were searching for?

Geron: I'd been looking for years, but when I found it I knew it at once. You might say I knew in the time it takes to open a prayer book. And maybe it's better not to say that I found it but that I recognized it. The first time I was among Baha'is, I recognized the love I'd felt when you were born. And when I read my first Baha'i prayers they weren't strange, they were familiar. The words were new, but what lay behind the words, the thing that turned them from words to prayers, this had been with me my whole life. At certain times I'd felt it more than at others, but it was always there. I felt it so deeply in the prayers that I spent all of my free time reading and reciting and learning them. It wasn't as much discovering something new as rediscovering something familiar: I was seeing something I'd seen before, but seeing it clearly now instead of at a distance.

Huios: It sounds like you really loved the prayers.

Geron: I did. No one forced a prayerbook on me, but when she saw that I was interested, the woman who owned it, she gave it to me. And I stayed up all night reading that prayerbook. I'd start at the beginning and when I reached the end, I'd start over again.

Huios: That's love, true love some might say. But this just brings me back to my question. If the prayers affected you this way, how can you set them aside so completely? I understand your disappointment with the Faith, because I share it. But I don't understand why you let that disappointment embitter you.

Geron: Bitter? I don't think I'm bitter, not at all.

Huios: How else when you cut yourself off from the past? What can it mean but that you're bitter? If you only said a prayer or read a passage from the writings, if you only showed that these things still mattered to you, it wouldn't seem this way. You said that the love you felt from the Baha'i community was real, that the love you read in the prayers was real. But when you turn your back on both, you're saying it wasn't real after all.

Geron: But what about all of the problems of the community? In the administration? You know all that's gone wrong. Do you think I should have accepted these things?

Huios: Of course not. You should know how I feel after all I've written and told you. I agree there are problems. I agree that I could never shun someone, that no person or

institution can be "freed from error" in the sense of never being mistaken. And I know that the Baha'i Faith can't save the world alone. But none of this matters here.

Geron: It doesn't?

Huios: No. It's all true and important in its place, but the fact remains that the love you found in the Baha'i community and in the Baha'i prayers was real. And it's not just that it was real, it's that it wasn't an aberration or an accident. The love that felt so genuine to you springs directly from Baha'u'llah's revelation, it's the essence of everything that He wrote, everything that others wrote after Him. In a sense, you can say that whole Baha'i message is nothing but love, no more and no less. That's what I hear Abdu'l Baha telling me.

> *Love is the real magnet which attracts the hearts and souls of men, and consequently the purpose of the manifestations of God is to radiate the light of love from their hearts. That is why Jesus said, "I am Love." Thus it becomes known that the highest human station, the chief virtue, the cause of the greatest progress and prosperity which humanity can attain, and the divine perfection of the human race is love, which is the greatest favor of the Majestic One… All the Divine manifestations and prophets taught this truth, and the purpose of all of them was love.*

Geron: I know those words, but I'm glad you mentioned them. I hadn't thought about them for a long time. But I still don't see what you're trying to say. What does it matter if Abdu'l Baha said that, if this is what's become of the religion he helped establish? What's the use of all those fine words if Baha'is shun Covenant-breakers or if they can't accept committed homosexual relationships? He can say all these noble things, but it doesn't change that he set up an authoritarian religious structure, a pyramid of power with infallible leaders at the top. Abdu'l Baha talks about love, but the leaders of the Faith today are as fundamentalist as any in the world. Why does it matter what these "Central Figures' said?

Huios: Because it was how you taught me the most important lesson of my life. It was how you introduced me to the religion of love, how you discovered it yourself. It's how we both learned to believe in religion without tolerating the abuses of religion, to reconcile reason with faith, to view every problem in terms of the common family of humanity. Words like those instructed us both.

Geron: But aren't there any number of other religions that teach the same thing? I could have taught you the same if I'd raised you as a Christian or a Muslim. You could have learned about God's love outside of any formal religious tradition.

Huios: Maybe. And maybe I could have known the same love I felt as a child from some other father. But I didn't. You were my father, you and my mother were the ones who taught me what love was. It might have been someone else, but it was you. And it's the same with Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l Baha. They weren't the first to teach the religion of love, and they're not the last, but the fact remains that they were the ones who taught you and, through you, who taught me. It was through Abdu'l Baha that I first read that love is "the living link that unites God with man," and "the most great law that rules this mighty and heavenly cycle," and "the supreme magnetic force that directs the movement of the spheres in the celestial realms."

Geron: All beautiful words: but look how it ends! When I became a Baha'i, I thought that the promise I'd felt in the sixties would be realized. We were going to unite the human race and make one family of the whole world. I thought that I would see the first signs in my lifetime, and that in yours or in your children's it might be achieved. But it's not going to happen. Love doesn't stand a chance against "do as we say', inside the faith or in the larger world. Or do you think that it will end differently? Do you think the Baha'i Faith has any real chance of uniting the world?

Huios: You've heard me say it. The Baha'i Faith can never save the world alone. They've shut out too many people for that. If they want to help the world, Baha'is have only two choices. Either become truly open and find room for everyone who loves the prayers and the writings, or accept that they'll always be a small religion, a minority in every country. But even if Baha'is won't allow the Faith to be truly universal, they can still do a lot of good. They'll just have to learn to work with others who share their goals even when they don't share their beliefs.

Geron: Maybe the House should invite you to help: even if they don't think you have Baha'i beliefs, they should know you believe in world unity.

Huios: I doubt that will ever happen. I don't think I'm well liked in Haifa.

Geron: You're probably right. And then what's the difference between you and me? In the end you've given up on the Baha'i Faith too!

Huios: What's different is that I haven't given up on the promise of the Baha'i Faith – the promise you raised me with. And that's a promise much bigger than any single teacher or movement. I'm talking about a promise that's universal.

Geron: Universal? The only thing I see that's universal is disappointment! People hoping for something that never comes! And it'll only be worse by the time you're my age. People are already noticing that Ruhi isn't getting results, that all these "A Clusters' and "cycles of intensive growth' are leading nowhere. The American NSA says it in their report, the one the House "corrected' afterwards, the one they buried so deep you can only find it on a few websites now. People are beginning to see that something's going wrong. Just think what they'll say when nothing's happened after thirty years!

Huios: I agree. At some point everyone's going to have their doubts. And when you talk about universal disappointment, you're actually very close to what I mean. I'm starting to believe that hope, and to some extent the failure of hope, is what defines the human condition.

Geron: I suppose that makes sense. If you look at history, there's plenty of disappointment to go around.

Huios: Yes. And your generation was hardly to first to feel it. You weren't the first to believe that the world was about to change forever and then feel cheated when it didn't happen. When your father and grandfather were young, the socialists and the radicals and the men and women of the labor movement thought they were the generation that would change the world. They sang the International, and believed in the promise that "a better world's in birth" in the same way that you believed that "the times, they are a-changing." Before that it was the French Revolution, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. Wordsworth might have been speaking for idealistic youth in your day, mine, or any other when he wrote: "bliss it was in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven." And long before that, the first disciples of Jesus were sure that He would return in their lifetime and establish the Kingdom of God on Earth. You came of age hearing Dylan sing that "the first one now will later be last," but the idea's much older. It stretches back long before the birth of Christianity. I'm sure it's as old as humanity, or at least as civilization.

Geron: I suppose that there's some consolation in knowing I'm not the first one to be duped. It's at least a small comfort to think that others have been deceived before me.

Huios: But were they only deceived? Simply because nothing lives up to the expectations people set, does that mean all's lost, that there's no value in the dream? I think the reason you're so bitter – and believe me that you are bitter – I think you're bitter because you've placed your hope entirely in the future, in this case on the World Order of Baha'u'llah that it was supposed to bring. When you lost faith in that, you lost faith in everything else too.

Geron: And how else could it be? It's what we all set our hopes on, even you. I know what you believed back in your teens. You hoped and waited and looked for signs with the rest of us. And now you know that it isn't going to come, or if it did, it wouldn't be anything like what we dreamed. In a way I'm glad the Baha'i Faith will never become the religion of the world. I wouldn't want it to, not if it's going to be religion of people who exclude and shun and control and follow leaders without thinking.

Huios: I agree. I wouldn't want a World Order like that either. But even apart from that, even if the future had been what we thought it was, I think we set too much hope on it. It's important to have goals, to know the direction we want to carry the world. But did we take it too far? I'm starting to think that this is the great mistake of all millennial movements, all these people who've dreamed of a new heaven and a new earth. They let their vision of the future push everything else aside. If you look too hard after what's to come, you can lose sight of the present.

Geron: And are you saying Baha'is shouldn't look towards the future? Good luck with that! You know enough to realize no Baha'i could ever accept it. Or can't you guess how you'll shock believers if you say you're not concerned with the World Order to be established in the coming centuries? And you think you have trouble convincing them you're a Baha'i now!

Huios: I can foresee their reaction well enough. But it won't be the first time people have been shocked like this. I've got plenty of examples to follow. Take Eduard Bernstein…

Geron: Who?

Huios: Eduard Bernstein was the German socialist leader at the turn of the last century, the one Lenin attacked for "corrupting' the original teachings of Marx. Bernstein outraged

everyone in his religion too – socialism is really a religion if you think about it. He wrote that the future society that European Marxists believed was coming wasn't important, he wrote that "the final aim of socialism means nothing to me."

Geron: That could never be popular. Socialism is all about the future. It's based on the theory that we're entering a new stage of history. It's all about uniting the human race: that's what every socialist expects.

Huios: In that sense it's a little like the Baha'i vision, isn't it? And that's why I admire Bernstein's courage in saying what he did. He wasn't afraid to declare that the thing everything else thought was essential didn't matter at all. He didn't care about the theoretical problem-free world to come, but about what men and women could do for each other in the imperfect here and now. "The movement means everything for me," Bernstein writes. He says that helping the human race today is better than worrying about an order that will only bear fruit, if it ever bears fruit, long after we're dead. When most socialists were preparing for the "final stage of history," Bernstein talked about decent wages, education, and health care for his own generation.

I have at no time had an excessive interest in the future, beyond general principles; I have not been able to read to the end any picture of the future. My thoughts and efforts are concerned with the present.

Geron: And would you really say the same thing in a Baha'i context? Would you tell Baha'is to think only of the present?

Huios: A thousand times over. I'd repeat it high and low to every Baha'i of every description in every community on earth. Build the World Order of today, and let tomorrow take care of itself! Help others now, and leave the future to future generations! At its best, thinking so much about the future allows us to forget the problems of the moment.

Geron: Like the AIDS epidemic in Africa.

Huios: Precisely. We save up all our money for the Arc Project and shiny, showpiece temples when we could be bringing real help to real people in need. It's like planning for twenty years ahead when people are sick and hungry at your door. And that's not the worst of it.

Geron: It's not?

Huios: Hardly. The worst thing about this fixation on the future is that it helps us justify things that have no justification. Because we've got to build the society of the future, we have to do unpleasant things in the present: shunning, disenrolling, denying due process. And it's all accepted because these are the sacrifices we must make if we want tomorrow to be better. The current order is only embryonic, after all!

Geron: I wonder how long they'll keep making that the excuse! But seriously, I might I agree with you, but don't imagine anyone else will! It's something they're just not ready to hear. You're asking people to give up on the World Order of Baha'u'llah. Why not go all the way? Why not ask them to stop calling themselves Baha'is altogether?

Huios: That's certainly how many people will feel. It's how everyone will feel who insists on understanding the World Order in the most literal sense, the people who imagine that Baha'is will convert every person on the planet and that the Universal House of Justice will rule the world from Haifa. But I'm not worried about them. I'm talking to you, and you already don't believe any of that. I'm trying to show you how the idea of the World Order can have another meaning, one that still holds value for us after what we've come to believe.

Geron: And what value is that?

Huios: A spiritual one. The idea of the World Order is a spiritual concept, and I think it can be best understood in a spiritual sense. This is what Christians do when they view the Kingdom Jesus promised as something other than an earthly kingdom. They understand it as something in the present rather than the future, and as something raised up in the hearts of the faithful rather than in the physical world.

Geron: It's a beautiful way of understanding things.

Huios: Baha'is could learn from it, too. Many of the first Christians thought the Kingdom was a physical kingdom, so it may be natural that most Baha'is still think the World Order is something visible and external that will be established in the future. But if you read the Baha'i scriptures, you'll see that it doesn't have to be that way. Do you remember what Baha'u'llah says about this in the Iqan?

Geron: Not everything.

Huios: Well, the relevant part is very brief.

The one true God… hath ever regarded, and will continue to regard, the hearts of men as His own, His exclusive possession. All else, whether pertaining to land or sea, whether riches or glory, He hath bequeathed unto the Kings and rulers of the earth.

There are many passages I could mention, from Baha'u'llah or Abdu'l Baha, but you can always find more if you want. I'm not going to try to convince you by piling up references to scripture. But there are enough of them – the place in the Aqdas where Baha'u'llah tells rulers he want to possess "the hearts of men" and not earthly kingdoms is one more example I might give. There are enough examples to argue that Baha'u'llah wouldn't want us to conceive His promise strictly in material terms. He invites us, I think, to reconsider this universal human dream – call it the World Order, call it the Kingdom of God on Earth, call it Socialism or even "the hour that the ship comes in." What kind of Kingdom will it be? When and where will it be manifested? If we reconsider our answers to these questions, we may reconsider this obsession with the future. What would it mean if the World Order wasn't something off in the distance, several lifetimes away, but something taking shape inside us right now? We would still need to think about the future, to challenge the world to change, that will always matter. But we would also act differently if we believed that God's dominion lies primarily in our hearts, and that the Kingdom of the Promised One of all ages is still not a kingdom of this earth.

Geron: So you're saying that you believe in a spiritual World Order? But is that any different from denying it all together? You avoid saying you don't believe by "spiritualizing' it, but it amounts to the same thing in the end. When you say the World Order can't be realized on earth, isn't that just giving up by another name?

Huios: Giving up on seeing it realized perfectly, yes. But that's not the same as giving up on the direction, on the ideal. You remember back when Tommy Douglas held the office of premier here, back during the fight to get universal health care, first in this province and later across the whole country, how he'd end his speeches? He used those famous lines from Blake:

I will not cease from mental strife,

Nor shall my sword rest in my hand,

Until we have built Jerusalem,

In this green and pleasant land.

Geron: I remember it well. Tommy was a politician, but he was also someone with a religious perspective: he knew that helping people when they needed it was a spiritual duty. He said that this was what it meant to be a society that honored God.

Huios: He was a minister before he ever entered politics, so it isn't surprising if he took a larger view of things. And the way he used those words underlines the point I'm trying to make. "Until we have built Jerusalem." The Kingdom is real enough: it's just that it's never complete. It's always a work in progress, to be laid up brick by brick: it's something we're striving after, something we always seek but still stays just out of reach. Which is another reason I love the metaphor of Jerusalem. Because in a sense, we're all pilgrims, each of us who follows God's love and is led to the love of humanity. We're all on a common road, and even if we never set eyes on the Holy City while we live, it remains our destination. Call it "the goal of our desires," to borrow words you taught me long ago.

Geron: Well, I guess that if those words have stayed with you, I must have done something right. They don't inspire me any longer, but I'm happy if they have meaning for you.

Huios: They do. All of them: not only the words of the Baha'i Faith, but of every faith, and everyone without a faith who speaks or writes words of hope and comfort. Whenever I hear or read about the longing for a better world – it doesn't matter if it's today or thousands of years ago – my spirit lifts: not because the dream is ever realized but simply that it is and that it continues despite inevitable disillusionment. I think that this dream of bringing the love of heaven down to earth reflects what is best in us and most like God. And I have you to thank for introducing it to me: for the prayers and songs and the love you shared. You can say what you like about your time as a Baha'i, but don't forget what you gave me during those years.

Geron: I won't forget. And I'm glad to hear you tell me this. It's good to know that I've left you something beside disappointment and failure. Your time's going to come soon enough, and you'll see that when you reach my age you'll want to feel you have something worthwhile to leave your kids, something to pass on to the next generation. And I guess

that if you still feel good about the world, if you're not beaten down and cynical, then maybe I haven't done so badly by you after all.

Huios: You've left me all that I could ask for. Have you ever considered formally resigning?

Geron: I've thought about it, but I don't think I'll do it. I've had my card this long, and I'll probably keep it. If they can disenroll people who still believe in Baha'u'llah so sincerely, it's a good joke to have them keep me on the rolls when I don't believe any of it. I'll go on getting Baha'i Canada and helping the LSA keep the books, and no one will be the wiser. I live too far outside of town for anyone to expect me at feasts or holy days. But maybe someday they'll ask me why I don't fast anymore.

Huios: That'll be a long answer.

Geron opens the CD player, drops in a new disc, and selects a track. "My Back Pages" begins to play, as Geron and Huios sit and listen.

Maxwell Baha'i School Closes

BREAKING NEWS

14 November 2007

Students, Staff, Parents and Supporters of Maxwell International School

Dear Friends,
Following extensive consultation and after sharing its concerns with the Universal House of Justice, the National Spiritual Assembly has taken the very difficult decision to close the Maxwell International School at the end of the current academic year.

When Maxwell opened 19 years ago, it was with the clear expectation that the school would quickly become self-sustaining and would not draw on the general funds of the Baha'i Faith. Sadly, this has not been the case, in spite of dedicated efforts by so many, and current projections indicate that the financial challenge facing the school will worsen. It

was in light of these financial realities that the National Assembly made the decision, with heavy heart, to close the school.

In recognition of the sadness the school's closing will bring to the family of students, parents and staff at Maxwell, the Assembly has asked two of its members to meet with the Maxwell school community to answer questions and to discuss the decision.

The National Spiritual Assembly deeply appreciates the sacrifice, commitment and vision that have built an excellent school whose achievements will be remembered for generations to come. May this assurance sustain all of Maxwell's steadfast supporters and allow this year, with its high and united spirit, to fulfill its brilliant promise.

With loving greetings,
NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF THE BAHA'IS OF CANADA
Karen McKye,
Secretary

cc: National Spiritual Assembly (9)

****
16 November 2007 / 13 Power 164

Dear Baha'i Friends,
Three members of the National Spiritual Assembly have just met with staff, students and supporters of Maxwell International School to convey the attached message which we now hasten to share with you.

As the letter states, the National Assembly has made this decision about Maxwell's future with heavy heart and asks that you remember Maxwell's wonderful school community in your prayers.

With loving Baha'i greetings,
Karen McKye, Secretary

Enclosure
cc:
Board of Trustees of Huququ'llah in Canada
Counsellors S. Birkland, A. Boyles, D. Scott

National Spiritual Assembly (9)
All Regional Baha'i Councils
All Auxiliary Board members
All National Committees and Agencies

Document:
Letter From National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Canada conveying news of closure of Maxwell International Baha'i School (PDF)

****

Sigh.

It was only 3 years ago (almost to the day) that I heard the news that Landegg Academy in Switzerland was being closed. For obvious reasons it has no functioning website now. You may view their site in a limited fashion through Archive.org's cache. Many Baha'is had high hopes for it to grow and develop into a prestigious Baha'i University.

In the end, the foundation which held all the assets of the Academy went into bankruptcy, all the real estate and its collateral were confiscated by the holder of the mortgage (Union Bank of Switzerland) and auctioned off. The foundation which provided the legal structure for Landegg Academy was liquidated and wound up sometime in the spring of 2005.

The reason? It could not create a self-sustaining organization. The same fate is destined for Maxwell International Baha'i School.

The school was started about 20 years ago and named after the parents of May Maxwell, otherwise known as R??h?yyih Kh??num (wife of Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith). Just recently, the school decided to drop the "Baha'i" from its name and become simply Maxwell International School. The NSA didn't outlined exactly when the school would be closed but it is safe to assume that this is the last scholastic year.

I can't help but think that this is exacerbated by the deepening crisis in the Canadian Baha'i funds. Maxwell has had ample time to get on its feet. That they haven't fully is the real reason why they will be closing. Yet I can't help but think that if the NSA could afford it, they would continue to subsidize it as they had since its inception. That they simply can't afford to, even though now we have a much larger Baha'i community in Canada than 20 years ago is telling.

Of course, we shouldn't pick on Canada. The Baha'is of the United States have their own problems in this area. According to the US NSA, the budgetary shortfall was 50% (last time I checked).

This is yet another wake up call. The dwindling amount of funds is a HUGE blinking red light. It is the most indirect, yet unmistakable way of measuring the health of a Baha'i community. Don't get me wrong. Life is not about money. And the Baha'i Faith isn't about money, nor should it be. It is simply that when people feel engaged, inspired, moved, transformed, their whole life… including the financial portion is touched. And they naturally, happily choose to support their community through all methods (including cash).

The fast ebbing flow of funds is yet another symptom that the community is not going in the right path. Instead of blaming the members of the community and flagellating them to eke out more money, this should be taken for what it is: a non-verbal and collective message.

What do you think? Is this a message? or are people just not “spiritual” enough to donate sacrificially? or can we blame the economy perhaps?

Sen McGlinn Unenrolled

The Universal House of Justice has sent a letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the Netherlands instructing them to remove Mr. Sen McGlinn from the membership rolls of their Baha’i community.

There is to be a meeting of the Local Spiritual Assembly (of which McGlinn is a member) without him on Thursday, December 1st 2005. I expect that after this meeting they will inform McGlinn officially.

It is still not definitively clear what reasons the House is using for this action. However, the purported letter to the NSA contains very much the same selective quotation of his words from the foreword of his recently published book, Church and State.

I will be writing more as more information becomes available.

> Dear Mr. McGlinn,
>
> The Universal House of Justice has advised us of its conclusion that, on the basis of your established pattern of behaviour and the

> statements you have published, you cannot properly be considered as meeting the requirements of Baha'i membership.
>
> Accordingly, we have removed your name from our membership roll and have informed the Baha'i institutions concerned.
>
> Sincerely
> …[signature]
> The National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the Netherlands

Related Links:

Letter of the House of Justice to the NSAs regarding McGlinn's book.

Alison's commentary in three parts: one, two, three.

Juan Cole's commentary from (H-Baha'i).

Karen's commentary.

My commentary on *takfir* or 'unenrollment'.

Meet the New Universal House of Justice

The scrutineers where scrutinizing so hard they are still squinting, the counters were counting (and re-counting), Counsellor Penny Walker, as chairperson of the convention, kept imploring the tellers to not actually look at the ballots because they didn't need to use their own eyes, they could just look through the eyes of the UHJ!

Thankfully they paid her as much attention as those kitschy drapes behind the main stage. And the results:

Farzam Arbab, Kiser Barnes, Peter Khan, Hooper Dunbar, Firaydoun Javaheri, Paul Lample, Payman Mohajer, Shahriar Razavi, and Gustavo Correa.

I'm shocked! SHOCKED I tell ya!!

Who could have ever imagined this surprising upset?

All seven incumbents: re-elected. And in place of the two retirees? who are the two new entrants?

Both previous members of the International Teaching Center – in turn previously appointed by the Universal House of Justice.

By the way, since usually the names are announced in descending order of votes, we can see that the two new ITC, oops! I mean UHJ members are the ones with the least votes.

I couldn't help but chuckle when I read this excerpt from the official Baha'i News Service:

> During the voting, a number of procedures were taken to ensure the integrity of the balloting process – some of which were visible and others less so.
>
> Foremost, the current Universal House of Justice was seated as a body, front and center, as obvious observers to the process.

Yes! What a strategic technique to insure integrity and remove any hint of electioneering or campaigning! Sitting prominently in visual range of everyone who is about to cast a ballot. That is the best way not to influence anyone in any way to vote for the incumbents.

I've put together the membership details of the Universal House of Justice from its inception, up to and including this new election. The details include the individual members, when they were elected, how long they served, how they departed (death or retirement) and what their prior position was within the Baha'i Administration:

I've hastily scribbled some thoughts below the data. You are welcome to study it and arrive at your own. Especially one which contradicts mine.

For those taking note, the trend that many had observed within the membership, namely moving away from National Spiritual Assembly (NSA) members to International Teaching Center (ITC) is now *complete*.

This is the first year – please mark it down on your calendar – that **all of the members** of the Universal House of Justice have been plucked from the ITC.

Which, I need not remind you, is itself appointed by the UHJ. So we now have come full circle. A bit like recycling I suppose. Hey, I'm all for helping the environment and recycling. Except in this case, what is being recycled, in a closed loop, are ideas.

Related:

- Two New Openings in Universal House of Justice
- The Song Remains the Same

Merry Christmas to One and All

AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino

Pope decries selfishness in economic crisis

AP – 9 mins ago

VATICAN CITY – Pope Benedict XVI warned in his Christmas message Thursday that the world was headed toward ruin if selfishness prevails over solidarity during tough economic times for rich and poor nations. Full Story»

Message from Above?

Have you ever gotten an email that wasn't intended for you?

I know its rare but it does happen. The mathematical probabilities aren't that small when you consider the sheer volume of email zipping around these days. Even so, I was flabbergasted when I got an email recently that most certainly was not intended for my eyes. It was…rather embarrassing, really.

I tried to send it back whence it came but it bounced back and almost shorted out my computer's CPU (the header and signature are also a head scratcher since it seems to be in this pure white light font which is almost blinding). So instead of trying that again and probably permanently damaging my computer, I opted to just share it here in the hopes that the Sender would see it and being notified of the mistake take precautionary measures so that similar occurrences are prevented in the future.

Oh, and to save you the anguish I went through (two bottles of Visine) I haven't cut/pasted the header info:

> Dear members of the Universal House of Justice,
>
> The Almighty God has advised us of Her conclusion that, on the basis of your established pattern of behavior and the statements you have published, you can not properly be considered as meeting the requirements of membership for such an august institution.
>
> Accordingly, we have removed your names from the Crimson Ark and have informed the Holy Entities concerned.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> The Concourse on High
>
> cc: Baha'u'llah, the Bab, Mohammad, Jesus, Moses, Zoroaster, Krishna, et al.
> cc: Holy Spirit, Maid of Heaven, Huruf-i-Hayy, Archangels & Chosen Angels, et al.

concourse-on-high.gif

Related:
Tragic News from Haaritz

Mona's Dream Film Update

It is a year and a half since we last visited the project to make a feature film about Mona Mahmudnizhad and the 9 other Baha'i women who were killed for their beliefs. It has been more than three and a half years since the first story was first mentioned (Passion of Mona).

But finally things seem to be coming together. The film, Mona's Dream will go into pre-production in the fall with shooting planned for this winter and post-production into early next year.

Which would mean that if the everything goes to plan we can see the film next summer. The project has currently half of its financial budget ($7 million) and will hopefully be able to raise the rest going into (pre-)production.

Here are the confirmed actors so far for the project:

Keisha Castle-Hughes to play Mona Mahmudnizhad

Keisha was catapulted into stardom with the movie “Whale Rider” in 2002; for which she received an Academy Award nomination. There is no question she is a talented actress but I’m surprised by this casting because ~~Keisha is twice the age of Mona~~ (Steve corrected me – see comments).

Shohreh Aghdashloo to play Mona's mother

Ms. Aghdashloo was the first high profile actor to be linked to Mona's Dream.

Cas Anvar to play main interrogator

The Canadian born actor has been prolific both on the stage as well as in film with many roles in both TV and movies.

Nazanin Afshin-Jam (in her debut) to play Tahirih

The Canadian model (Miss World Canada 2003 and Miss World runner-up) and singer is active in human rights causes. She first took on the cause of Nazanin Mahabad Fatehi who was sentenced to death in Iran but who later received a new trial and was exonerated.

As well, a new foundation, inspired by the project and Mona's life, has been created: Freedom to Believe Foundation.

More of the Same

I noticed that as soon I put up my reply to a message on Baha´i Livejournal it was erased.The moderators of that website have complete control and authority to moderate as they wish, of course. Nevertheless, if they think that this somehow shuts me up (or others like me) or "protects" others from my "subversive" ideas they are mistaken.

Wake up. This is the internet (some even say alluded to by Shoghi Effendi himself). No one can control it. No one. Stop this before you look more and more like the IRI. Right now, all the AO can do is censor ideas off certain websites and send threatening letters. And when

or if they have real powers? How many “dissident” Baha´is would be under house-arrest or jailed? I wonder.

Rather than engaging in dialogue with a fellow Baha´i, they choose to censor and shut themselves off. Rather than consulting and exchanging differing ideas (to see if we can cause a spark to fly off), they cocoon themselves in a community of likeminds. No free thinkers allowed!

It is amusing that the readers of Baha´i Livejournal are actually somewhat familiar with my blog. Someone recently even copied and pasted my complete post regarding Oneworldhosts – with the careful attention of not mentioning who wrote that post or where it was found. And another referred to my post on Mona.

So basically, they can take from my blog when it suits their purposes, but I can´t contribute to theirs. Ummm.. yeah, ok.

No related posts.

National Spiritual Assembly (United States) Letter – April 8, 2007

I did a double take when I read this excerpt from a letter dated April 8th 2007 sent by the **National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the United States**:

> Our assessment of the Baha'is community’s spiritual vitality and prospects for growth inspires our confidence that "the elements required for a concerted effort to infuse [our country] with the spirit of Bah??’u’ll??h’s Revelation" are robust and capable. Public awareness and receptivity to the Baha'is Faith are high, tens of thousands of Baha'iss are trained in the core activities, well over 1,100 children’s classes are held regularly, 41 programs of intensive growth are in operation, and Local Spiritual Assemblies and cluster agencies evince increasing vigor in their pursuit of the Plan’s goals. Nevertheless, as we reported last year, growth remains low. The past 10 years have witnessed a 50 percent decline in enrollments.

I know, I know, as usual many will think that I'm making this up. Save your darts for the pub and see the letter for yourself.

I believe it was George Santayana who said:

> A fanatic is one who, having lost sight of his aim, redoubles his efforts

Being less eloquent than Santayana, I scratch my head and say, wtf?

When will the group think end? when will they pull their head out of the sand and realize that what they've been doing simply is… not… working.

When?

When we have an 80% drop in enrollments? when we actually start seeing a drop, not in enrollments, but in the actual Baha'i community membership?

I'd really like to know what it would take wake these people up!

They seem to be so sound asleep that a gong banged centimeters away from their ears wouldn't in the least disturb their slumber.

Do not disturb. NSA member at work

Naw Ruz Message – Year 166

To the Baha'is of the World

This Naw-Ruz marks the centenary of one of the outstanding events in the Apostolic Age of the Baha'i Dispensation, the interment by 'Abdu'l-Baha of the sacred remains of the Bab in their permanent resting place on God's holy mountain. In the words of Abdu'l-Baha: "The most joyful tidings is this, that the holy, the luminous body of the Bab …after having for sixty years been transferred from place to place, by reason of the ascendancy of the enemy, and from fear of the malevolent, and having known neither rest nor tranquility has, through the mercy of the Abha Beauty, been ceremoniously deposited, on the day of Naw-Ruz, within the sacred casket, in the exalted Shrine on Mt. Carmel."

In commemoration of that triumph of the Cause, the members of the Universal House of Justice, accompanied by the members of the International Teaching Centre, have today offered prayers of thanksgiving in the Shrine of the Bab on behalf of the worldwide Baha'i community, expressing gratitude for the unfailing divine protection vouchsafed to the Cause of God. In their solemn contemplation, their hearts were stirred as they recalled the indelible image of the Master left to posterity when, on this day a hundred years ago, having with His own hands laid that peerless Trust in its final place of repose, He rested His head upon the edge of the blessed casket of the Bab, and "sobbing aloud, wept with such a weeping that all those who were present wept with Him". They remembered, too, the manifold obstacles with which He had been confronted in constructing this sacred edifice and His unbounded relief at having accomplished one of the principal objectives of His Ministry.

A century ago, the Faith was emerging from a period of severe crisis during which the incarceration of 'Abdu'l-Baha by His inveterate antagonists in the Ottoman Empire had been renewed, a grievous assault on the unity of the Cause had been launched by the Covenant-breakers, and an upsurge in the persecution of the heroic Persian believers had produced a fresh wave of sacrifice. In the immediate future there lay dazzling victories. The strenuous and fate-laden journeys of 'Abdu'l-Baha to the western world would release

incalculable spiritual powers destined to give rise to unprecedented progress of the Faith in the American and European continents He visited. The Tablets of the Divine Plan would set in motion processes designed to bring about, in due course, the spiritual transformation of the planet. The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Baha would establish the basis for a future world order.

Today the Cause of God is again confronted by cruel and relentless opponents seeking in vain to eradicate it in the land of its birth. However, this is occurring in a world far different from that of a hundred years ago, when the Faith was largely unknown and its defenders were few. From all parts of the world the followers of Baha’u’llah appeal for justice, while providing, in the example of their lives, compelling evidence of the absurdity of the accusations leveled against their Iranian brethren. In this appeal they are joined by fair-minded people of all backgrounds, including thousands of Iranians who express their concern at the denial of the human rights of their Baha’i compatriots.

The sacrifices of the Bab and the dawn-breakers of the Cause are yielding abundant fruit. Energized and confident, the followers of the Greatest Name throughout the world have mobilized their resources in a vast and concerted endeavour to offer the healing balm of Baha’u’llah’s Teachings to the multitudes of humanity. The magnificent progress achieved over the past century demonstrates the invincible power with which the Cause is endowed. It is but a portent of the ultimate realization of the oneness of humankind.

The Universal House of Justice

You can find the Naw Ruz letter from the House, here- translated in Persian and French – along with other relevant documents, reports and academic papers.

New Baha’i Renovation & Beautification Projects

shrine-bab-israel-60-anniversary-light-show

Shrine of the Bab illuminated by celebration of Israel’s 60th anniversary.

The Universal House of Justice has communicated the expansion and continuation of renovations and beautifications for existing and expanding Baha'i properties in Israel. Click to read the full letter here.

The BWC has been able to exchange some land north of Akka for a plot adjacent to the Mansion of Bahji. The current resident is the Israeli Military. There are continuing negotiations with the government for additional land exchanges adjacent to the Mansion of Mazra'ih and the Ridvan Garden.

There are renovation and beautification plans for the Ridvan Garden (in Israel) and well as Junayn Gardens, also frequented by Baha'u'llah (although much less frequently). I haven't visited the Junayn Gardens but when I was in the Ridvan Garden I didn't find anything that looked shaby or needed beautifying.

It was, to my eyes, a beautiful and relaxing place with little or no evidence of the hyper-manicured lawns and flowers of Mt. Carmel. In fact, I preferred its more rustic and natural look. I'm certainly no expert but it would seem to me that it was more historically accurate and in keeping with the conditions that were present at the time of Baha'u'llah. But then again, I don't want to make assumptions because the UHJ hasn't detailed what exactly they will be doing to "beautify" the Ridvan Garden.

The Shrine of the Bab will also receive attention with the installation of earthquake resistant support, the restoration or replacement of the dome tiles (gold plated) which have lost their shine due to exposure to the harsh elements of Haifa's port city atmosphere and the opening of the remaining 3 chambers, behind the Bab's resting place, to the visiting public and Baha'is. Presently this space is closed off to visitors and is being used for storage. This space was, curiously enough, used by Shoghi Effendi, to house temporarily the archives related to the Baha'i Faith.

Speaking of the archives, the International Archives Building is being fully restored and renovated both inside and out. I covered the reason for the restoration of the Archives building previously.

Since I wrote about the detrimental effect of Haifa's polluted air, nothing has really changed. In fact I wouldn't be surprised at all if within our lifetimes the BWC had to undertake a wholesale and complete restoration project to repair the damage it had wrought to the Arc buildings.

As you may have surmised by now, all of this will require money. So the UHJ is asking for donations through the NSAs and various Baha'i funds to finance these restoration, renovation and expansion projects.

"New" National Spritual Assembly Members Elected

The delegates of the 15th Baha'i National Convention elected the new members of the NSA for the United States. But to be fair, they are not all that new. Basically every single previous member was re-elected to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the US (in descending order of votes received):

Kenneth E. Bowers
Muin Afnani
Juana C. Conrad
David F. Young
Jacqueline Left Hand Bull
S. Valerie Dana
Fariba Aghdasi
Erica Toussaint-Brock
Robert C. Henderson

Likewise, the delegates of the National Convention in Canada re-elected the exact same individuals to serve on the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Canada (in descending order of votes received):

Karen McKye
Deloria Bighorn
Mehran Anvari
Judy Filson
Elizabeth Wright
Enayat Rawhani
Gordon Naylor
Susanne Tamas
Lisa Flynn

Sadly, this pattern of electing the same people again and again has been going on for some time. The individuals on the NSA of Canada, for example, have on average 10 years of

consecutive membership! And if there is any change, it is rare and small with one or perhaps two people changing at a time. In fact, over the past 16 years there has never been one instance of more than two individuals being changed in one year.

The results of this are apathy on the part of the general Baha'i community. The results of the election are a foregone conclusion before they take place and as such they are of no interest to the average Baha'i. And as apathy takes hold and less and less people vote, the effect of incumbency intensifies even further in a vicious cycle.

Apart from this negative effect on the community, the institution itself suffers as cliques form and individuals create and protect fiefdoms within their purview. Old time members naturally are more comfortable with old ideas and hostile to new ones. Even the wisp of fresh air brought in by the election of one new individual is overpowered by the musty stench of incumbency wafting from the other eight. And so, fresh ideas and insights are forfeit as group think takes hold.

Is there a way out of this quagmire? Yes, of course! But while it is simple it is not necessarily easy because many Baha'is today are more concerned with maintaining the status quo than addressing the shortcomings of community. The advice of the Guardian on the importance of "fresh blood" is disregarded in favor of not rocking the boat:

> "As elections are by secret ballot only the education of the electorate can bring about changes on assemblies which often stagnate from lack of fresh blood…"
> (From a letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada – March 31st 1945)

Beyond an educated electorate there are other steps that can be taken. For example, both term limits and a modification to the form of voting can completely eliminate incumbency.

But first, it is important to keep fresh in our minds that Baha'i Administration is an evolving organism. The one we see today in action around the world would not be recognized were we to travel back in time in a DeLorean to 1901. Most Baha'is do not realize that – for example- it took several decades for LSAs to be elected rather than appointed! And that even when they were democratically elected, only men were considered candidates.

Baha'i Administration was designed from the very beginning to be continuously modified and refined – recall that the Baha'i dispensation is for 1000 years and that the contingent needs of a constantly advancing civilization requires flexibility. Only those with closed minds bereft of any sense of history or knowledge about the Faith cling to the only thing they know and the only thing they have experienced so far in their own lives – afraid that anything different is "bad".

The suggestion of term limits, for example, is but one small idea put forward in the spirit of consultation. The concept by the way is much older than the America government which has popularized the concept in the world today. In fact, the concept of term limits as old as the idea of democracy itself: Athenian citizens could only serve in the boule for two consecutive terms or two maximum terms in a lifetime. The founding fathers of the United States "borrowed" quite a bit from successful governing ideas from around the world and throughout history.

There are other ideas and methods of course – alternative voting methods for example. The important thing is to be open minded and enter into true Baha'i consultation about this issue.

For an interesting discussion of Baha'i elections, check out Sen McGlinn's recent article: "Without Reference to Particular Individuals"

News from Chile [2]

Here is some recent news from the BWC on the ongoing Temple project in Chile:
THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
Baha'is World Centre . P.O. Box 155 . 31 001 Haifa, Israel
Tel: 972 (4) 835 8358 . Fax: 972 (4) 835 8280 . Email: secretariat@bwc.org

Transmitted by email
TO: All National Spiritual Assemblies
DATE:14 April 2005

Dear Baha'is Friends,

It gives us great joy to announce that on 8 April 2005, having finalized a purchase agreement, the National Spiritual Assembly of Chile took possession of the site on which will be built the last of the continental Mashriqu'l-Adhk??rs of the Baha'is world. The land is located north of the capital city of Santiago on a rise nestled in the foothills of the majestic Andes mountains. The way is now open for realizing the intention expressed by Shoghi Effendi that the first House of Worship in South America be erected in Chile.

Following our announcement on 12 June 2003 of the choice of the design presented by the architect Mr. Siamak Hariri, news spread rapidly in the architectural world, arousing favourable interest among influential circles, leading to unprecedented media coverage of the project in Chile, and attracting attention to the Faith of a wide range of its citizens. Much has occurred as a result.

In connection with the current decade-long commemoration of Chile's two hundred years of independent nationhood, the Chilean Bicentennial Commission has designated the House of Worship as one of a limited number of official bicentennial projects in the private sector. This clearly reflects the civil authorities' recognition of the significance of this edifice and their confidence in the benefit the undertaking will bring to Santiago and to Chile as a whole. As a consequence, the possible location of the project in the city's central park was explored with the open support of several government officials, but, for various reasons, this proved unfeasible.

Meanwhile, substantial progress has been made with technical preparations for the construction work to be initiated in a few months. A groundbreaking ceremony is planned as part of a three-day gathering to commence Friday, 14 October 2005. Selected representatives from all national Baha'is communities of the Western Hemisphere, with a special emphasis on the countries and indigenous peoples of South America, will be invited to attend this event.

The financial implications of this enterprise present the Baha'is world with a new challenge. Total cost of the project is estimated at twenty-seven million dollars, and the plans now call for its completion within a period of three years. It is vital that the flow of contributions to the already established Chilean Temple Fund be greatly increased to ensure full support to the work. The friends everywhere are called upon to seize the opportunity to contribute sacrificially to an undertaking that holds immense promise for the advancement of the Cause and has already been the object of marvellous confirmations.

Let all reflect on the stirring words of the Master, revealed in connection with the raising up of the first House of Worship of the West, and draw from them inspiration for the great task ahead:

> O God, my God! I implore Thee with a throbbing heart and streaming tears to aid whosoever expendeth his energy for the erection of this House, and the construction of this Building wherein Thy name is mentioned every morn and every eve. O God! Send down Thy divine increase on whosoever endeavoureth to serve this edifice and exerteth himself to raise it amongst the kindreds and religions of the world. Confirm him in every good deed in promoting the welfare of mankind. Open Thou the doors of wealth and abundance unto him and make him an heir to the treasures of the Kingdom, which perish not. Make him a sign of Thy bestowals among the peoples and reinforce him by the sea of Thy generosity and bounty, surging with waves of Thy grace and favour. Verily, Thou art the Generous, the Merciful and the Bountiful.

The Universal House of Justice

cc: The Hand of the Cause Dr. "Al?-Muhammad Varq??
International Teaching Centre
Boards of Counsellors
Counsellors

****

First, the House of Justice glosses over the details by saying, “for various reasons, this proved unfeasible.” I’ve already discussed the details of why the location in Metropolitan park was denied, so I won’t repeat them here.

Second, the Chilean Bicentennial Commission’s recognition of this project is really being blown out of proportion here. If you recall the Commission’s role is to organize various projects and events to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Republic of Chile. This project is being recognized only because of the prestige that it brings to the country (lets face it, which enlightened government wouldn’t want something like this in their backyard?) and not due to any relevance to Chile, its history, or culture.

Third, the project is now officially behind schedule as the original ground breaking was supposed to have already taken place. Though I'm glad that they got their hands on some land rather quickly, it does seem that the project team was taken by surprise when the Metropolitan Park land offer fell through.

Now to get down to the numbers. As you know, the Baha'i world community has already been earmarking funds for the construciton of the Chile temple for years. I estimate there are around $10+ million on hand, or about one third of the estimated cost. (By the way, the currency being discussed is the US dollar.) I'm not sure just how realistic the $27 million (or the three year time table) is. Such projects have a tendency to run over-budget, especially in a developing country. But then again, the project team could pull it off without a hitch. I wish them the best.

And as usual, ancillary costs are not mentioned. I'm referring to the continual costs of maintenance and management once the building is constructed. In the world of large scale projects, usually a percentage or a dollar amount per sq. footage is quoted for such costs. We've already seen this happen with the Arc project on Mount Carmel. There the cost was around $250 million and afterwards we were informed that the ongoing costs are around $7 million annual. Using the same rough ratio these ongoing costs would be around $1 million for the Santiago temple.

If I were the Chilean Baha'i community I would be asking myself how in the world I'm expected to meet those costs. After all the Baha'i community in Chile is rather small (around 2500 from a population of around 16 million) and the standards of living are not that high. Previously built temples have shown that such costs are very real and must be taken into consideration (the recent refurbishment of the roof of the Frankfurt temple and comprehensive works of the Illinois temple being good example). Yet, I doubt these ideas

are creeping into anyone's mind as it is just too darn exciting to think about such an architectural marvel being built. But once they sober up, they will have to deal with it. Either they'll have to meet the extra $1 million annual cost or the international Baha'i funds will have to (or some combination of the two).

Finally, I wanted to offer some heretical thoughts (and you thought the above was bad). Its just that I keep asking myself about the opportunity costs of this project. By that I mean, what else we could do with $30 million? How many humanitarian projects could we undertake? How many people's lives could we improve or save?

Lets face it, the effect of this temple is minimal to the lives of people around the world and even those inside Chile. It really changes nothing. The only gain is a few prestige points in the eyes of architects around the world who may feature the structure in one of their magazines and ooh and aah over it for a few minutes (as they have already begun to do).

I don't have anything against building temples per se. Its just that the priorities of the Baha'i world wide community are out of whack. We should concentrate on things like charitable funds and the Mashriqu'l-Adhkhar:

> The most beloved of hopes will never show her face in these lands until charitable trusts are founded, their continuation is assured, and their scope widened, as mentioned and underlined before in the letters of this servant.
> (Shoghi Effendi, December 30, 1926)

> Let the friends recall and ever bear in mind the repeated exhortations and glowing promises of our beloved Master with reference to the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar, the crowning institution in every Baha'i community.
> (Shoghi Effendi, Baha'i Administration, page 108)

I read these words and can't believe that they are being ignored so flagrantly.

And I would prefer that things take shape organically with grass roots support, rather than arbitrary top down decisions imposed on all. Take this example: the AO is funneling funds from all around the world to build a really nice building in Chile. Not only does that effect Chile (which has to bear the ongoing costs once it is finished) but it effects other countries and communities who have a finite amount of resources and are now forced to channel

some of these precious resources to this project, thus forgoing other projects in their own communities.

Why don't we imagine how many local initiatives (yes, tiny little ones) can be started with $30 million? why don't we imagine how many Mashriqs we can have?

Also, I truly wonder which has benefited the world more, a bookish professor who founded Grameen Bank (which has gone on to help millions of the poorest people in the Indian subcontinent) or the Baha'is who have built a beautiful lotus temple, which is just nice to look at?

Why can't we set up something like that? or maybe ACCION, the most successful South American version of it?

Perhaps some will criticise this idea, claiming that we do not have the competence in the Baha'i community to create such programs. To that I say, balderdash. If we have the competence to build and manage such building projects then we can tap the resources to do these charitable projects as well. Its just a matter of putting money where your mouth is.

For more recent news about the Temple in Chile check out this entry (bottom of page).

News from Chile

Even before being constructed, the planned Baha´i temple in Santiago, Chile is causing heated debate within that country. The magnificent temple which will have 9 alabaster petals, a capacity for 600 people and stand as high as a 10 story building is planned to begin construction in 2005. But first, a location will have to be found.The Baha´i community always thought that the temple would be situated on a plot of land outside of the Chilean capital. However, just as they began the process of requesting construction permits and such, the government of Chile, specifically the Bicentenary Commission approached the Baha´is of Chile with a surprising and generous offer. They asked the Baha´is to relocate the temple from outside the city to the Metropolitan Park situated on a prominent Northern hill just outside the city center.

This offer, made public in mid December, set off a huge debate within the political and public arenas. Chile, like most South American countries is full of Roman Catholic and Evangelical Christians and it is logical for the people, as well as the Churches, to be shocked by the offer to cede so much land and of such high caliber to a religion wholly unfamiliar to most Chileans. As well, the timing of the leaked information was inflammatory, coming at a time of deep religious significance. According to one politician who railed against the offer, “it makes no sense that the Bicentenary Commission has offered such land to a religion which has not even contributed one paragraph to the written history of Chile”.

The Bicentenary Commission was created to oversee different acts and events for the commemoration (on September 18th 2010) of the 200th anniversary of the Republic of Chile. And although it is under the supervision of Ministry of Housing, its function is strictly defined. In hindsight, it shouldn’t have been the organization to make such an offer because it automatically opened itself up for much deserved criticism.

It seems that the Baha´i community of Chile has an uphill (forgive the pun) battle to fight as the vast majority of Chileans know nothing about them nor their beliefs. They are therefore, easily mislead by erroneous reports by journalists who use the word “sect” to describe the Baha´i Faith. And in general they are ignorant of the basic facts related to the Baha´i Faith and can´t really be expected to be able to make a sound judgment call about the question. There has been no organized, public response by the Baha´is of Chile, either in rejecting the offer or in fighting in the political and public arena to ensure its success.

However, it is important to note that this whole debate was an entirely internal matter and true to form, the Baha´is did not side with nor entered the debate even. Also, it must be pointed out that the offer was not to simply give the Baha´i community of Chile the land in the park. This is a common misinformation spread within the Baha´i world community. Due to the legal ownership of the park lands on the hillside of Dos Gemelos, it is not possible to transfer title, instead, the offer was to lease the land for 50 years in return for relatively little consideration. Presumably, the lease would have been extended at its end. As well, there were numerous conditions to the offer and the non-compliance of any one of them would present the danger of the land and everything else reverting back to the government.

It didn´t take long for the Islamic community to throw in their two cents. Their reaction was predictable: vehemently negative. At the start of the hubbub, they announced that they may hold a press conference to discuss the Baha´i Faith, which they consider to be "adversarial" to Islam.

According to Mockenburg, one of the two Chilean politican most opposed to the idea, "they [Bicentenary Commission] have chosen the least appropriate place, but not only that: it strikes one as odd that they give this land to a religion practically insignificant and one which does not exist in Chile. For now, there is nothing constructed, because it is planned to begin in the middle of 2005, but what does the Baha´i religion have to do with our country and specifically, the Bicentenary Commission?"

In actuality, the Baha´i community of Chile numbers around 15,000. Roughly one for approximately a thousand Chileans.

Other politicans defended the offer made by the Commission saying that they don´t see it as a religious matter at all, but rather, recognize in it an opportunity to revitalize an area of the city and perhaps gain international accolades for the architectural qualities of the project. It is reasonable for them to think along these lines, especially as the Lotus Temple in India has shown just how powerful and prestigious such structures are and how positively they impact their immediate surroundings. As well, among urban planners the "Guggenheim effect" has also gained popularity after the revitalization that the city of Bilbao, Spain experienced with the location of the van guardian structure designed by Canadian-born architect, Frank Gehry.

One Chilean expert on sects and religions who has published a book on the Baha´i Faith said that if this decision goes forward, it may set a dangerous precedent where other small groups will expect equal treatment from the government. As well, many people argued against the location of the temple in the Metropolitan Park because they believe that the Commission should not give away land which is the right of all Chileans. To them it is not appropriate to cede such a public place to a specific group or organization. The politicans in favour of the decision pointed out that once constructed, the temple would be open to all the peoples of the world, regardless of religious affiliation, color or creed. And that the Baha´i Faith is a religion devoid of any form of clergy or fixed special ceremonies.

It would be wrong, however, to categorize the opposition to this offer as led by the Catholic Church. The Commission, itself has several members as representatives of the Catholic Church and they were the ones who made the original recommendation. Instead, it appears that most of the opposition to the idea came from misinformed public opinion as well as Evangelical churches and politician members of these churches who could not imagine the idea of an obscure religion putting down such prominent roots in their city.

The whole debate concluded as fast as it arose and having been one sided from the start, it was lost rather easily. The Baha´is, it seems, were happy to stand back and allow the people and government of Chile to make the final decision, knowing that they are not bound at all, to even accept the offer, where it to be confirmed and finalized. They refused to be drawn in to a debate or argument, only limiting themselves to correcting, when the opportunity arose, misinformation about themselves, their intentions and their faith.

Finally, an excuse was used to scrap the whole thing altogether: it seems that the zoning permits in the area of the park only allow a 3 story high building to be constructed and since the temple is atleast 10 storeys the project is not possible. The idea that such zoning restrictions can and sometimes is ammended was brushed aside. One gets the feeling that everyone involved, the politicians on both sides, as well as the Baha´is, simply want the conflict to go away.

So the search goes on for a location with the clock ticking (construction is supposed to begin in mid 2005). But the temple of Santiago seems to have garnered a unique distinction. Even before being built it is living up to its monicker of a “silent teacher”.

For an update on the Temple in Chile, click here and here (bottom of page).

No Goats Harmed in Making of the Baha’i Faith

Haven’t seen Juno yet, but now I guess I have to

UPDATE:

I watched *Juno* and found it to be a charming movie. As Mavaddat mentioned in the comments section, Rainn Wilson's role was tiny but he still gave a fantastic performance.

So far he has played smaller roles in movies and although he has been great in every movie that I've seen him in (*Sahara* was another) he hasn't been given a career making role like his TV co-star Steve Carell with *The 40 Year Old Virgin*.

Steve put up a video of Rainn at the recent North East Baha'i Youth (NEBY) conference in Stamford, Connecticut.

No One Knows About Persian Cats

Last year's charade election in Iran laid bare the stark reality in that country for not only the rest of the world but also for many of the usually apathetic Iranians inside Iran. The friction between the oppressed and their oppressors reached a climax with street protests and violent clashes.

After a few weeks of shocking dismay, the powerful control apparatus put in place by the Basiji, the Revolutionary Guards and Ahmadinejad clamped down and eventually snuffed out the protests. But don't mistake the tranquility on Tehran streets as a sign that everything is back to normal. The turmoil in Iran is simmering under the surface, ready to boil over at a moment's notice. This is far from over.

Amidst this historic upheaval, the acclaimed film director Bahman Ghobadi made his latest work: "No One Knows About Persian Cats". Like most Iranian cinema it defies classification being more a documentary than film. It chronicles the lives of a group of young Iranian musicians struggling against the stiffing oppression that prevents them from even playing the music they like.

The film was the winner of the Special Jury Prize at Cannes Film Festival and was written in collaboration with Roxana Saberi (Ghobadi's fiance), who as you might recall, was arrested and imprisoned on charges of espionage. I haven't watched the movie yet but this clip featuring a Persian rapper is mesmerizing (pause if you need to, to be able to read what he is saying):

The ruling mullahs are afraid of the power of music like this. And for good reason. The video above is just one of the musicians featured in the film. All of them decided to leave Iran (and not to return from Cannes) expect the man rapping in this clip. Click to watch the trailer for "No One Knows About Persian Cats" or this alternative trailer:

This theme of leaving Iran to the decrepit cleptocracy is one that I've written about more than a few times already. Iran is bursting at the seams with youth who are brimming with potential. The problem is that the country has been organized in such a way to snuff out any and all hope and progress. Your average Iranian youth, like the ones above, have no qualms about leaving Iran in order to create a better life. Even Baha'is are doing so every day in groups.

My only bone to pick is with the Baha'i administration that actively pursues a policy to keep as many Baha'is inside Iran as possible. No matter how dangerous the consequences may be for them. Anyway, if you can catch Ghobadi's latest work in your local cinema, don't miss the chance.

NSA Elections in North America 2009

Ridvan ushers in not just a great festival for the Baha'i world but also the annual National Conventions where we get a chance to reflect on the year past, accomplishments and future goals. As well as to elect the 9 members of our national governing bodies. Yes, it is springtime and incumbency is in the air.

With the retirement of Dorothy Nelson, the US NSA was given a rare opportunity to welcome a new member: Ms. Valerie Dana from Colorado. She is an attorney at law and until 2004 she was a director of the Mona Foundation.

Except for this new member, the same 8 incumbents were re-elected and not surprisingly, in almost the same order of votes: Jacqueline Left Hand Bull, David F. Young, Kenneth E. Bowers, Juana C. Conrad, William Roberts, Muin Afnani, Erica Toussaint, Robert C. Henderson.

US NSA with new member, Valerie Dana

The national convention in Canada had similar results except that two previous members retired, allowing for two new members to be elected. Elizabeth Wright was elected to the NSA of Canada in January 2009 as a result of a by-election caused by the resignation of Fariborz Sahba. From 2004 onward, Mr. Sahba had been a member of the national governing body and acted as the Treasurer. So although technically Wright was re-elected, I still count her as a new member because of the circumstances.

The second new member is Deloria Bighorn, replacing the retiring Mark Wedge who had been serving on the NSA for 10 consecutive years. Similar to the longstanding member she replaced and Valerie Dana, Ms. Bighorn is a North American native. Previously she acted as the Director of Aboriginal Affairs for the NSA of Canada, as well as working as a counselor at the now closed Maxwell Baha'i School.

Elizabeth Wright, Gerald Filson, Deloria Bighorn

The 7 re-elected incumbents are: Karen McKye, Todd Smith, Borna Noureddin, Judy Filson, Enayat Rawhani, Gordon Naylor, Elizabeth Wright and Susanne Tamas (in descending order of votes). Deloria Bighorn received the lowest number of votes which is in keeping with the traditional experience for new members.

Because incumbency is so prevalent, it is rare to see 2 new members in one election. Usually we see either no change, with all previous members re-elected or just one new face

due to retirement. The last time we saw 2 new members, as is the case this year, was in 1999. The longest serving members of the Canadian NSA are Judy Filson and Enayat Rohani. The average consecutive years in office is 8 – meaning that the average member of the NSA of Canada has been a member for 8 years *consecutively*. Due to the 2 new members, this represents a slight decrease from last year's number of 8.6 years.

There is a happy medium between too many years and too few years. If members are changing quickly, then they don't have time to learn, make connections and to be able to take up the heavy responsibility that comes with being an NSA member. On the other hand, if membership is hardly changing at all, as we are seeing now, the disadvantages are that people get burned out, devolve into group-think, run out of ideas, form cliques and fiefdoms, etc. For this reason, it is difficult to draw the line and give a specific number of years, for example.

But when we are seeing that the only way new blood can be introduced into an NSA by the decision of an incumbent to retire due to old age, then it is safe to suggest that the pendulum has swung to an extreme. Of course, we are talking about a free election here. No one is forcing the Baha'is of the US and Canada to elect the same people over and over again.

And yet they do. There is an inherent flaw in the structure of the elections which needs be addressed. It is at this point that fellow Baha'is usually bristle with affront and close their minds. Which is unfortunate since the administrative processes are an evolving and organic framework. Even a cursory study of them and their history would attest to the fact that they are not set in stone and shouldn't be – especially if they start to produce harmful results. They are the servants to the community, not the other way around.

To understand the flaw and how it can be remedied, please refer to a previous discussion: Baha'i Elections – How to Improve Them.

Related:

- Explaining Incumbency in Baha'i Elections
- 2007 NSA Elections
- 2006 NSA Elections

NSA Elections in North America – 2010

The recent NSA elections in North America was in keeping with the well-known bias towards incumbency. All previous members were re-elected to their positions with no new members entering either NSA.

Jacqueline Left Hand Bull, Chair (standing at the podium), David F. Young (Vice-Chair), Juana C. Conrad (Deputy Secretary-General), Kenneth E. Bowers (Secretary-General), Erica Toussaint, Muin Afnani, Valerie Dana (Deputy Secretary-General), Robert C. Henderson, William L.H. Roberts (Treasurer).

Last year two members of the US NSA retired, allowing for two new members to enter the institution. I'm looking for historical data for the US NSA to verify how far this trend has been in effect but today it seems that the only way for a new member to enter the NSA is for an existing member to retire. Otherwise, forget about a chance to vote in any one new. This bias towards incumbency is not difficult to explain since it is baked into the very process of Baha'i elections and is not characteristic of just the US community.

You can clearly see this pattern in Canada as well. This year, the members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Canada are: Deloria Bighorn, Judy Filson, Karen McKye (Secretary), Gordon Naylor, Borna Noureddin, Enayat Rawhani (Treasurer), Todd Smith (Vice-Chair), Susanne Tamas and ?lizabeth Wright (Chair).

All 9 members were re-elected. In fact, the average consecutive years in office for the current Canadian NSA is 9 years. Think about that. This means that a member has been in office for an average of 9 years! Of course, since we had two retirements recently, there are also members who have only been on the institution for a short time. The relatively new member, Wright, is this year's chairperson.

But there are also those who have been serving for much longer than the average. For example, Judy Filson and Enayat Rawhani tie for the longest duration of concurrent membership at 15 years.

There are many reasons why having zero or minimal change in membership is detrimental to the functioning of the institution and therefore the community at large. I'll just briefly touch on a few negative consequences.

When you have the same people year after year elected to the NSA everyone gets to know everyone else very well. Being merely human, what happens is that cliques are formed and made more and more rigid after each year. Everyone's views on different issues becomes well known to the point that even before you consult, you know exactly who will take what position and who will support whom.

As well, when the same people work with each other for a long time a natural air of casualness and collegiality develops. This informality removes the barrier that is there in a formal relationship where individuals are merely acquaintances. The consequence is that

people are more and more likely to take things personally and for challenging issues to deteriorate into personality conflicts.

Finally, as a consequence of having zero or very few new members, the institution forgoes the benefit of a fresh new perspective and new mindsets. Since almost most, if not all, incumbents are re-elected, membership changes at a glacial pace. That is we have one, or at the most, two new members who join the majority who are incumbents. This majority as a consequence of multiple years of consecutive membership are already seeped in the culture that I outlined above. Quickly the new member(s) fall in line and join a clique and adopt the same paradigm as that held by the majority.

FABLE of the FIVE MONKEYS

This means that it is basically impossible to change the direction, tenor and culture of the institution as it becomes more and more hardened. Actually this reminds me of the fable of the 5 monkeys:

You begin with a cage containing five monkeys. Inside the cage, hangs a banana on a string and a set of stairs under it. Before long, a monkey will go to the stairs and start to climb towards the banana. As soon as he touches the stairs, an automatic spray will soak all of the other monkeys with cold water. After a while, another monkey makes an attempt with the same result, and all the other monkeys are sprayed with cold water. Pretty soon the monkeys will try to prevent any of them from approaching the banana.

Next, unbeknownst to the monkeys, the valve to the cold water is shut off. And then, one monkey is taken out of the cage and replaced with a new one. The new monkey of course sees the banana and wants to climb the stairs. To his surprise and horror, all of the other

monkeys attack him. After another attempt and attack, he knows that if he tries to climb the stairs, he will be beaten.

Next, another of the original five monkeys is removed and replace with a new one monkey. The newcomer goes to the stair and is attacked. The previous newcomer even takes part in the punishment with enthusiasm! Likewise, a third monkey is replaced, then a fourth, then finally the fifth and last.

Every time the newest monkey takes to the stairs, he is attacked. Most of the monkeys that are beating him have no idea why they were not permitted to climb the stairs or why they are participating in the beating of their peer. After replacing all the original monkeys, none of the remaining monkeys have ever been sprayed with cold water. Nevertheless, no monkey ever again approaches the stairs to try for the banana.

And that is how organizational cultures are born.

On the off chance that an NSA does actually break out and try something new, they are quickly swatted down from a higher institution which has itself also fallen prey to the very same organizational illness. The clearest and most recent example is the fiasco surrounding the 2007 annual report from the US NSA.

NSA of Canada Funds Report For 2009

Sunlight is the best disinfectant so let's see if we can allow some to fall onto a topic rather dank and musty for most Baha'is. The National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Canada has submitted their tax returns to the government of Canada and since this information is in turn public, let's take a look to see what we can learn about how the NSA is spending the funds donated to them.

Please don't take my word for anything and double check the numbers for yourself. You can see the T3010 Charities Tax Return filled out by the NSA by visiting the CRA charities website. Unfortunately Baha'is like me have to rely on this information because the NSA does not share information with them via normal Baha'i channels.

As you'll see below, even within this legally enforced format, their disclosure leaves much to be desired and rather than provide answers, it delivers new questions. Below you'll find some of the things that jumped out at me. Perhaps you'll notice other points and if so, I'd welcome your comments.

Revenues

In the Revenue section of the "Statement of Operations" there is a clumsy error showing that simple arithmetic continues to challenge the Treasury department at the NSA of Canada.

(Statement of Operations) **Revenue:**	**T3010** **Line #**	**Total ($)**
Total eligible amount of all gifts for which the charity issued tax receipts	4500	$6,688,533
Total amount received from other registered charities (excluding specified gifts and enduring property)	4510	$4,201,533
Total specified gifts from other registered charities	4520	$89,124
Total other gifts received for which a tax receipt was not issued by the charity	4530	$1,086,582
Total interest and investment income received or earned	4580	$83,700
Gross proceeds from disposition of assets	4590	$3,280,443
Net proceeds from disposition of assets (show a negative amount with brackets)	**4600**	**-MISSING-**
Other revenue not already included in the amounts above	4650	$13,374
Total revenue (add line 4500, 4510 to 4580, and **4600** to 4650)	4700	$12,284,818
Total Revenue (est. by assuming net approximates gross proceeds)		**$14,267,583**

Line 4600 is simply missing (empty cell rather than the word MISSING that I wrote above). If we assume that the total number ($12,284,818) entered in the T3010 is correct, then that implies a net proceed of $1,175,706 from the gross proceed of $3,280,443 – less than half. Of course, you and I are not privy to the actual accounting ledgers but can only go by what we're given from the NSA. But that implied amount for the net proceeds is

highly improbable as it would require an unfathomably exorbitant expense related to the sale of the assets. Much more likely is a clerical or human error.

So either the person who filled out this form made a mistake by calculating the net amount incorrectly and then compounded that mistake by excluding it from the form (only allowing us to calculate the amount via inference by deducting it out of the sum) or they made the mistake of not adding the net proceed amount correctly to approximate the gross proceed (somewhere close to $3 million) and then forgot to add it to the net revenue. In either case, the key word here is mistake and somewhere, someone made either one or several.

The next interesting tidbit is that total donations (however we finally calculate it) were significantly lower than the previous year – in 2008 the NSA reported total revenue of $16,277,836. For the past 10 years or so, the NSA built up quite a war-chest as almost every single year had positive net inflows (I know, I know, during those same years they were continuously screaming about deficits and shortfalls – that's another story). To make up for the shortfall in 2009, it seems that the NSA dipped into its coffers and sold about $3 million worth of investments. This represents about 13% of its total 2008 liquid assets.

Chile Baha'i Temple

So what did they do with the money raised by donations from Baha'is and from the sale of their long term investments? The NSA decided to step up big time (or they were directed to by the UHJ/ITC) and sent the vast majority of their donations (and then some!) to help build the temple in Chile. In total, $12,988,273 was sent outside of Canada:

Organization	**Amount ($)**
NSA Baha'is of the US	$59,150
NSA Baha'is of Chile	$12,538,058
Various NSA's, Pioneering & Teaching	$391,065
Total Activities outside Canada	**$12,988,273**

This is much more than the average ($4 million) for expenditures sent outside of Canada for the past 12 years and close to the highest amount sent outside Canada in 2004 – $14 million. But those funds were sent to Haifa. The fact that the NSA sold off a significant amount of their investment assets implies that this was done to pay for the ongoing

construction costs and that they did so as directed by Haifa. This isn't surprising as usually the most well off countries pay much more than the average share of such projects.

Compensation

There are several important issues here with compensation. First of all, this is the first time ever that the NSA has actually followed the CRA laws and disclosed the total amount that it is paying in salaries and like compensation. They have also gone back and re-submitted this for the 2008 and 2007 returns (but not the previous years). For example, in the T3010 filings for the fiscal year 2004 there is $43,746 under "Management & Administrative Expenses" even though in another location they cite the total number of compensated employees at 45!

In any case, now that we finally have the information, it is very interesting. In total, the NSA spent $2,431,889 on compensation for the fiscal year 2009. That is a significant amount relative to the total donations received. Using their own total amount for donations received, then the NSA of Canada spent 20% of their total revenue on compensation.

The sum comes up to a huge amount if we divide by the 20 or so people who work full time or part time in Baha'i administration in Canada. Why 20? To start, we have 9 people on the NSA itself and then about 10 others who work at the National offices and other ancillary administrative work. It is a rough estimate, I'll concede, but it will do for a back of the napkin calculation. So $2,431,889 divided by 20 is $121,594 – that's a lot of money! That's more than $10,000 every single month for one year, for 20 people. Wow.

Fortunately, the CRA requires charities to provide some more information regarding their compensation expenditures. They do not have to detail their compensation expenditures but only have to disclose how many full-time employees are within certain ranges:

Salary (Min)	**Salary (Max)**	**Salary (Median)**	**# Persons**	**Total**
$1	$39,999	$20,000	1	$40,000
$40,000	$79,999	$40,000	9	$720,000
(NA)	(NA)	Part-Time	3	$50,000
Total Compensation				**$810,000**
Total Compensation Reported to CRA				$2,431,889
Discrepancy				**$1,621,889**

In the salary range of $1 – $39,999 the NSA has 1 full time employee. In the salary range of $40,000 – $79,999 the NSA has 9 employees (quite possibly the NSA members). And finally, there are 3 part time employees who received a total of $50,000 compensation in aggregate.

Let's assume the maximum for each salary range. So for we have $40,000 plus 9 full time employees at $80,000 each and finally, $50,000. That is a total of $810,000.

Hmmmm…. notice anything? The total compensation for the salaried workers is $810,000 – giving them the benefit of the doubt and assuming the maximum point in the range – but the total compensation is $2,431,889. So there is more than $1,600,000 unaccounted for.

If we assume the median, rather than the maximum for the salary range, the difference is even larger. A very large amount of money is spent via expense accounts (including travel, short term accommodation, etc.) as well as salaries relative to the total budget of the NSA. Unfortunately, the NSA is not only reticent to share information when it comes to the annual report submitted to delegates at the National Convention, it is also reluctant to accurately fill out the CRA charities report as you can see. Or perhaps they are just incompetent and the calculator was being used by someone that day.

Well, that's about it. If I notice anything else of import, I'll mention it. But for now, let me know what you think. If you're a Baha'i in Canada, have you ever tried to contact the NSA requesting more detailed financial information? I've spoken to a few Baha'is who tell me that their experiences with the Treasury department are slightly less interesting and fruitful than talking to sheetrock.

Oh and if any fellow Baha'i from the US knows how or where to access the 990 form for the NSA of the US, let me know. Thank you.

NSA of Canada Funds Report for 2010

Happy Naw-Ruz everyone! I hope the new year brings with it joy and success to you all.

At Baha'i Rants, with Naw-Ruz comes the ritual reading of the Canadian funds report as submitted to the Canadian Revenue Agency by the NSA of Canada. Thanks to this government mandated disclosure, Baha'is get a glimpse into the financial workings of their community. Sadly, this is something that would not be possible otherwise since the NSA believes that opacity takes precedence over transparency and have not to this date shared such information with the community at large voluntarily or supplemented the government mandated disclosure with any further information or explanations.

As with last year's exercise, this one leaves much to be desired. It isn't difficult to find errors and strange things in the T3010 forms. I encourage you to go to the source and see for yourself at the CRA website.

Revenues

Just as last year, the total revenue reported by the NSA (or whoever filled out the T3010 on behalf of the NSA) is incorrect. The total revenue line is quite simple to calculate, if you know how to add and read at a rudimentary level.

As the form helpfully says: "Total revenue (add line 4500, 4510 to 4580, and 4600 to 4650)". If we do so, following that guidance diligently, the amount is $13,539,028. However, the amount reported by the NSA is $14,980,518.

A significant discrepancy of $1,441,490.

(Statement of Operations) **Revenue:**	**T3010** **Line #**	**Total ($)**
Total eligible amount of all gifts for which the charity issued tax receipts	4500	$7,246,278
Total amount received from other registered charities (excluding specified gifts and enduring property)	4510	$4,053,205
Total specified gifts from other registered charities	4520	
Total other gifts received for which a tax receipt was not issued by the charity	4530	$1,312,236
Total interest and investment income received or earned	4580	$2,196,128
Gross proceeds from disposition of assets	4590	
	4600	

(Statement of Operations) **Revenue:**	**T3010** **Line #**	**Total ($)**
Net proceeds from disposition of assets (show a negative amount with brackets)		
Gross income received from rental of land and/or buildings	4610	$129,254
Other revenue not already included in the amounts above	4650	$43,417
Total revenue (add line 4500, 4510 to 4580, and 4600 to 4650)	4700	$14,980,518

Simple arithmetic 2, Treasury Department of the NSA 0. The brutal battle royale continues. Perhaps we should buy the NSA a calculator? or an abacus at least. That should even the odds a bit.

What could possibly explain the $1.4 million discrepancy? I don't really know but it may have something to do with the $2 million interest and investment income.

I suspect that this amount is also incorrect and that it has lead to the incorrect total revenue amount being reported. By itself it seems beyond belief for three simple and logical reasons. First, we are in a low interest rate environment. Second, I don't believe that the NSA would jeopardize the funds of the Faith by exposing them to high risk, and therefore, seeking a high return. Third, the total portfolio amount reported is not large enough to provide for such a yield.

Finally, if we are to argue that the $2 million in interest and income derived from investments is a reasonable amount, then we must explain how the NSA's portfolio did not earn an amount even approaching that sum the previous year.

Last year the NSA reported just $83,700 for the line 4580 "Total interest and investment income received or earned". So obviously something is amiss.

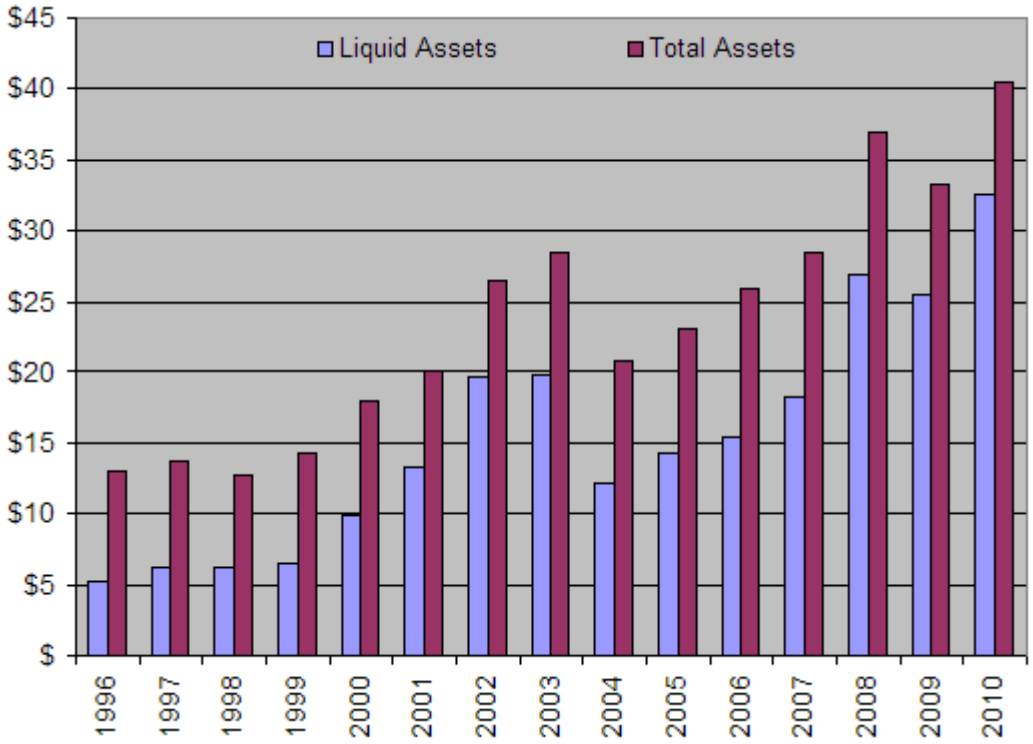
It would make sense if the $2 million were to be instead disposition of assets. Or a combination of interest and income earned as well as disposition of assets.

Apart from such odd discrepancies, the pattern of donations seems to be holding steady from last year and increasing from prior years.

Assets and Liabilities

The assets of the Baha'i community of Canada have been steadily increasing over the

years. In 1996 the liquid assets (excluding capital assets like buildings) were a little over $5 million. In 2010 they were more than $32.5 million.



There was an uncharacteristic decrease in 2004 but once again, I suspect that this is due to an error. Prior to 2004 the NSA had been reporting $12-13 million in “Other Investments” but in 2004 they suddenly reported zero and continued to do so until 2009 when they suddenly reported $4.35 million.

The other interesting thing is that the NSA is reporting $5.2 million in liabilities in 2010. This is the most debt the NSA has reported for more than 15 years. It is probably a mortgage debt related to one or more properties.

I hope that with this warchest, the NSA doesn’t resort to the past manufactured financial crisis situations to motivate Baha’is to donate. Cash or cash equivalents are at $27 million, receivables at more than $1 million and investments at $4.35 million. This year there was a surplus of $2.8 million.

The key question is what is the NSA planning to do with this much money? As the amount grows, so does my concern. This large amount of money coupled with limited or non-existent controls, oversight and disclosure provides for a fertile environment for nasty

things to happen. We've already seen a financial scandal in Italy. I don't want to see one in Canada.

As the total amount grows, so does the potential for theft and fraud. As does the challenge of managing the money and providing proper stewardship. Unfortunately, we have no information about who is managing this portfolio for the NSA nor how they are doing so.

Commensurate with the large amounts in question is the imperative for the NSA to give proper account of what exactly its intentions are for the funds and how they are managing them.

NSA of Canada: Two New By-election Members

As a result of two appointments by the Baha'i World Center which necessitated a recent by-election, the NSA of Canada has two new members. Borna Noureddin is moving to Haifa to join other Continental Counsellor and Todd Smith will be moving there to serve at the BWC.

Outgoing Members

Borna Noureddin holds a Doctorate of Electrical and Computer Engineering from the University of British Columbia and was an instructor at the British Columbia Institute of Technology since the summer of 2010. He was first elected to the NSA of Canada in 2007, replacing retiring member, Don (Otto) Rogers. He held the position for almost 4 consecutive years and in his last year as member, he was the Chairperson of the NSA.

Todd Smith holds a Doctorate of Philosophy degree in sociology from the University of Toronto. Before serving on the NSA, he was a member of the Baha'i Council of Ontario from 1997 to 2008. He was elected to the NSA on April 2008 to replace his father David Smith and served as assistant secretary for the first two years and as vice-chairperson for the final year.

Incoming Members

Dr. Mehran Anvari completed his education at University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and at University of Adelaide where he received his Ph.D. in gastric motor function. He has a Fellowship in General Surgery from the Royal College of Surgeons of Canada and is a Fellow of American College of Surgeons. He currently teaches in the department of surgery at McMaster in Hamiton and is also the Director of the Centre for Minimal Access Surgery. Dr. Anvari previously served on the Baha'i Council for Ontario.

Simon Grandy along with his wife, Jelana Bighorn, has been very active in teaching the Faith, especially with the junior youth. He is the son-in-law of current NSA member, Deloria Bighorn – first elected to the NSA herself in 2009. Grandy was just elected a month ago to the Baha'i Council of British Columbia (November 24th, effective November 26th – the Day of the Covenant). He received 254 votes from 75 participating LSA's which placed him in the top three. As a result, the Council will have to hold a by-election to replace him.

The picture below shows Simon Grandy with Jelana Bighorn (and their son, Ohiyesa – native for "one who wins" or "the winner". The image is from the Vancouver conference held in early 2009 as part of the global regional conferences of the 5 year plan.

Baha'i Rants wishes Dr. Noureddin and Smith the best in their new endeavors at the Baha'i World Center and welcomes the addition of two new faces on the NSA of Canada.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the two recent newcomers are only replacing those who already were new themselves to begin with. That is to say, the majority of members (quorum) on the NSA have been consecutive members for a very long time. These are Judy Filson, Enayat Rawhani, Karen McKye, Gordon Naylor and Susanne Tamas. These five members have been consecutive members of the NSA for more than 10 years.

From an organizational point of view, any real change in the culture of the NSA would necessitate their replacement. Incremental changes at the periphery, such as one or two new members, provides no real opportunity for change or fresh ideas. For an explanation of why, read about the Fable of the 5 Monkeys.

Oil Plunge Heightens Tensions in Iran

For several years I was reluctant to even consider the possibility of a regime change in Iran. Predominantly because of the high price of oil which allowed the IRI to funnel vast amounts of petro-dollars in order to prop up their decaying government. But the financial crisis that we are all going through now has profound consequences for Iran and by

corollary, the Baha'is living there. A recent article from the Wall Street Journal highlights the situation (see below).

Even Ahmadinejad can no longer continue his usual anodyne analysis of the situation. Whereas he once claimed that Iran would be fine with oil at $5 a barrel, he is now acknowledging reality, more or less. The fact of the matter is that because of structural challenges, Iran has the highest break-even point for oil. A level many experts put at $70 to $90 a barrel.

Some question that Iran will undergo economic stress pointing to the decline in oil prices during the 1980′s, when the commodity briefly changed hands at single digits. The problem with drawing such comparisons is that they are irrelevant. For one, the severity was less in 1980′s – that is the slope or degree to which prices fell, relative to time, was much slower. This year, prices have fallen to an unprecedented intensity.

As well, Iran's economy was much smaller back then. Recall that Khomeini pushed policies which encouraged Iranians to have children as well as simply mandating it as piety and loyalty to the Islamic Revolution. As a result, Iran's population grew from approximately 46 million to 70.5 million. This increase, coupled with the high level of government subsidies for fuel, has seen a growing portion of oil pumped out of the ground consumed inside Iran by gas-guzzling junkers, leaving a smaller and smaller portion to export.

Meanwhile, because of trade embargoes which restrict technology transfers related to military and oil services industries, Iran has been unable to increase its daily oil output by a significant degree. All of this means that Iran is in a much more precarious situation now than it was at the beginning of the Islamic takeover.

The myopic policies of Ahmadinejad also have contributed to a weakened economy. Almost every month economists plead with him to return to a sensible economic plan. But

he continues to hand out money, stoking inflation which by the government's own account is running at 25% and by objective estimates much, much higher.

No one has a crystal ball to see if Iran's future will be economically turbulent enough to cause the present regime to collapse, but it is obvious now that the country will go through a severely harsh time. I suspect that collapse is a very real possibility given three assumptions: the continued global recession, the continued weakening of crude oil and continued economic isolation from the rest of the world. For more, read the Wall Street Article:

Oil Plunge Heightens Tensions in Iran

Falling oil prices and soaring inflation are squeezing Iran's economy, sparking anxiety among top officials and citizens on how the country will cope.

Iran's budget deficit next year will widen to as much as $50 billion, economists forecast. In a turnabout earlier this month, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad acknowledged the plunging oil prices are hurting the economy and said the government would have to abandon "a major part" of its public projects. It was a rare admission for the president, who until then had said Iran's economy was immune to the global downturn.

The economy is becoming a sore point for the populist Mr. Ahmadinejad, who came to power promising to bring the country's oil money to the people, and faces new elections in June. "What has the government done with $200 billion in oil revenues?" was the headline on one daily newspaper in Iran this week.

The downturn is a heated topic these days. In taxis and shops, at work and family gatherings, Iranians say they are being squeezed by soaring prices and economic instability. Newspapers devote many pages every day to dissecting various problems people face, such as unemployment and inability to buy property. Recently, a government study showed that a young college graduate had to work and save 40 years in order to be able to afford to buy a first home.

Oil's recent plunge has been a huge blow for Iran, where crude accounts for 80% of the country's annual revenues. Oil dropped below $34 a barrel on Friday, down more than $110 from its peak in July despite a pledge by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting

Countries this week to cut production dramatically. In response, Tehran's stock market dove to a five-year low this week, down nearly 18% from October.

The parliament recently broke ranks with Mr. Ahmadinejad over the economy, vowing to block a reform plan he has proposed. Under his plan, all state subsidies on electricity, gasoline, and water would end, and sales taxes would be enforced. The government would offer payments of up to $70 a month for each member of a needy family. Economists warn that cutting fuel subsidies would cause instant inflation of up to 80%. Mr. Ahmadinejad hasn't submitted his plan to parliament and instead has written the fuel-subsidy cuts into next year's budget.

Ahmad Yousefi, a 47-year-old taxi driver, says he and his wife and their two college-age children work but they still can't make ends meet. They often skip having meat or chicken in their meals and have no savings or disposable income. "If they cut the subsidies we will not survive. Even if they give us $70 a person, with inflation, it won't make any difference. We are doomed," he says.

The government is widely criticized for lacking fiscal discipline, failing in its touted efforts to create jobs by injecting cash into the economy, and allowing too many cheap imports that compete with local agricultural products.

Iran's Central Bank reported last week that inflation hit a record high of 25% over the past 12 months. Prices for food and drinks rose 35% in September alone, and Iran — though it is world's fourth-largest producer of oil — ranks as having the lowest annual economic growth among Central Asian and oil-producing Middle Eastern countries, the bank said.

The widespread dissatisfaction over the economy has strengthened the president's political opponents, in particular the former reformist President Mohammad Khatami, who is emerging as a possible candidate. However, Mr. Khatami has expressed reservations about whether he could turn the economy around with oil prices so low and international pressure at its height.

As Iran's economy falters, it will become more vulnerable to outside pressures, analysts here say. Iran could face tougher sanctions over its nuclear enrichment program, which the U.S. and its allies say would enable Iran to make atomic weapons. Iran dismisses the allegation and contends that its enrichment of uranium is for peaceful energy purposes.

So far Iran has indicated it won't abandon its nuclear program under any circumstances.

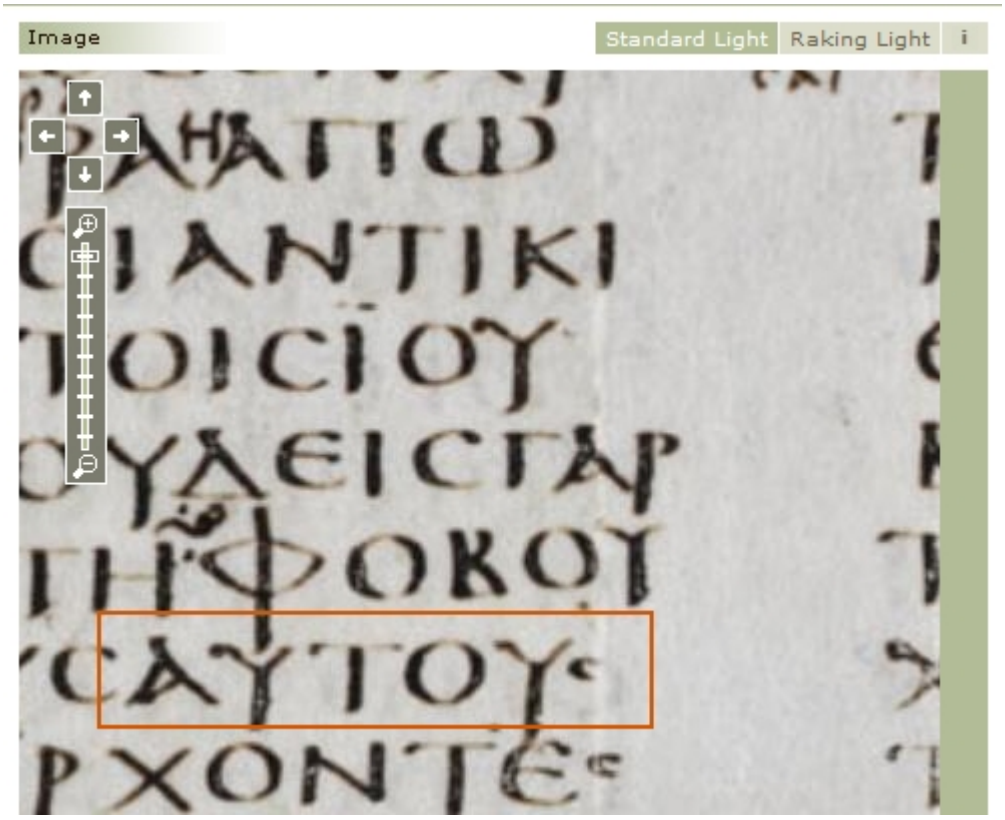
Some observers say that could change. "Our state of economy is desperate now, and it will get worse. If the U.S. offers Iran an attractive economic package that would lift the sanctions and allow Iran to tap into the American market as well guarantee the regime's security, I think Iran would be interested," says Saeed Leylaz, editor of the business daily Sarmayeh.

Farnaz Fassihi

Oldest Bible (Codex Sinaiticus) Now Online

Although in physical form it is in 4 separate locations around the world, the oldest known copy of the Bible is now completely online. The document dates back to Constantine I and is considered one of the world's greatest written treasures. Now, thanks to the internet, everyone has equal access to this historical heritage.

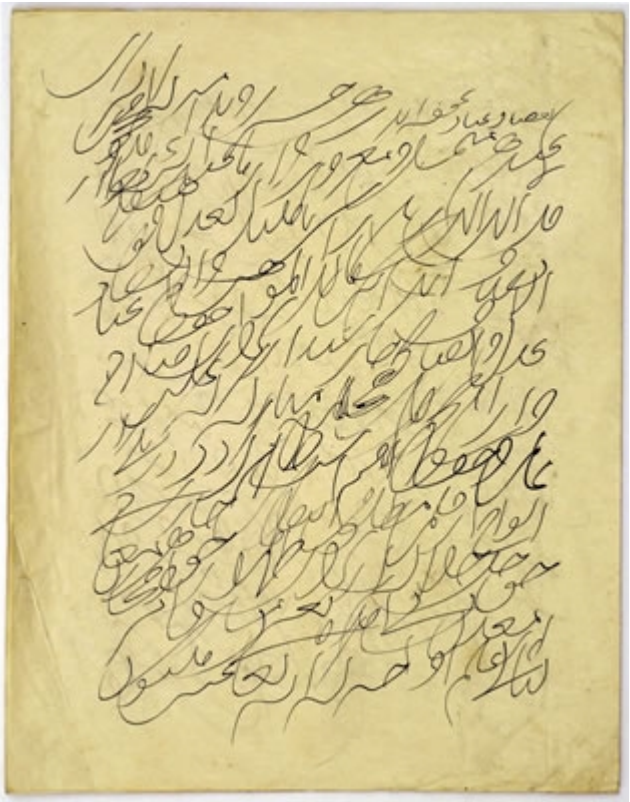
To find out more about why this document is so important, you can read more about it here. Interestingly enough, there are many discrepancies between the contents of the Codex and what we consider as the Bible today. For example, it has no mention of a resurrected Jesus – a pivotal component of modern Christian doctrine.



I took the image you see above while playing around with the controls at the Codex Sinaiticus website. As the image shows, you can zoom in to see quiet a lot of detail.

Even you are not a librarian or a photographer or an archivist, it isn't difficult to imagine the daunting task of digitizing a 1,600-year old manuscript that is literally falling apart.

This monumental achievement reminded me of the massive volumes of Baha'i texts which are hidden away in vaults and not accessible by scholars (or anyone else). To give you an idea of what a similar project for Baha'i texts would look like, here is a low resolution image of an excerpt from the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf by Baha'u'llah (written in the handwriting of Mirza Aqa Jan, Baha'u'llah's amanuensis):



It is difficult to estimate the sheer magnitude of material that is locked away right now. But I would estimate that less than one percent of the total is currently published. Most are kept in special archival vaults under Mount Carmel but there is also an impressive collection in the Afnan Library in England.

Sadly, the website of the Afnan Library is merely a bookmark on the internet rather than the storehouse of information it could be if it were used as a portal to the contents of the documents held there.

The Baha'i Faith is the only world religion which has verified and authentic religious texts. As well we have an untold wealth of secondary documents. So it is frustrating that they are not shared freely with the world. After all, the documents are intended for all of humanity. So it would follow that they should be made available as widely as possible. Before, this meant either publishing the content as books in their original language – which had limited market and was an expensive undertaking – or translating them to English or other languages to open up a larger market – but this meant expensive and protracted translation projects.

With the advent of the internet, we have the solution. When texts are published online in digital format, as with the Codex Sinaiticus, they are available to as many people as

possible for the least per unit cost. This opens up an incredible panorama of possibilities and advantages. Not only for scholars and others who are interested in the text but also for the dissemination and scholarly advancement of the content itself.

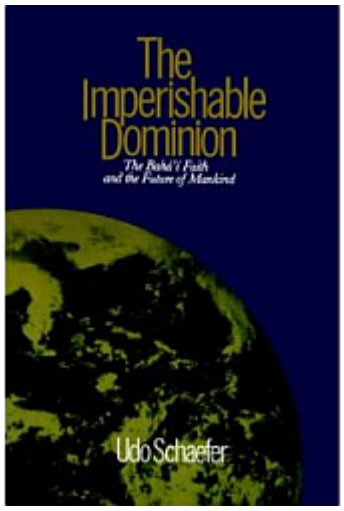
The Baha'i Reference Library is a good step towards this end but it is infinitesimally small compared to what could be done. For the price of one translation project, all Baha'i texts could be digitized and made available online in their original format.

Because the Baha'i texts are so young, they are in very good condition and could be digitized much easier than the Codex. As it stands now, a person would have to request permission (something that is not always given – especially if the person's views vary at all with that of the UHJ/ITC) and then physically go to Haifa and London. This cumbersome and anachronistic process need not continue.

The Baha'i Faith is the youngest of the world religions and as such it is only natural that we should be at the vanguard of realizing the full potential of the internet. I hope to see this fulfilled in my lifetime.

Omid Djalili Talks About His Faith With BBC Radio

The actor and comedian Omid Djalili sat down to discuss his faith and upbringing with with Joan Bakewell, the host of BBC Radio 3′s program "Belief". The radio program features "artists, scientists and thinkers and asks them about what they believe and why".



Omid beings by saying that instead of being proud to be Iranian, as a Baha'i, "he glories in this that he loves his kind".

Although Djalili is a 5th generation Baha'i, his parents did not teach him about the Baha'i Faith at all. In fact because of how they earned their livelihood, they would dissimulate being Baha'is! As a result, he didn't declare when he was 15, his mother unbeknownst to him signed his declaration card on his behalf!

As an adult he re-discovered the Baha'i Faith and he credits Udo Schaefer's The Imperishable Dominion as a major influence. Djalili's independent 'rediscovery' of the Faith is strikingly similar to the experience of US comedian, Rainn Wilson. I'm sure there is a lesson in there somewhere for Baha'i parents.

Currently Djalili plays "Habib" a quirky character written for him in the new US television series "The Paul Reiser Show".

On the Persecution of Iranian Baha'is

A few months ago the Baha'is of Washington DC organized an event in support of the Baha'is of Iran. The evening featured Ms. Shohreh Aghdashloo, Dr. Azar Nafisi, Dr. Dwight Bashir, Layli Miller-Muro, as well as theatrical and musical performances.

Here is a short video of the Emmy award winning and Oscar Nominated actress, Shohreh Aghdashloo, speaking via video from Los Angeles to the gathering in DC:

Ms. Aghdashloo is featured in the upcoming film, Mona's Dream, about the life and martyrdom of Mona Mahmudnizhad. She will be playing the role of Mona's mother. The film is set to (hopefully) go into production this year.

Here is a quick recap of the evening:

More recently, the Universal House of Justice released a short statement asking Baha'i communities around the world to observe a special day of prayer on May 14th in honor of the unjustly persecuted Iranian Baha'is:

> It grieves our hearts to contemplate the passing of yet another year in which the seven former members of the Yaran remain imprisoned on baseless charges for which the authorities have no evidence whatsoever. The approach of the second anniversary of their incarceration calls to mind the multifarious forms of oppression being visited upon the members of the Baha'i community in Iran of all ages and walks of life, including interrogations, summary arrests and imprisonment, deprivation of the means to a livelihood, wanton destruction of property, and the denial of education to Baha'i students. The heroic steadfastness of the friends in Iran in the face of such relentless persecution inspires their fellow believers around the globe to redouble their efforts to serve humanity and contribute to its material and spiritual progress. It has also led to the gradual, but undeniable, awakening of the conscience of fair- minded Iranians, who have been moved to express their concern at the violation of the human rights of their Baha'i compatriots.
>
> We call upon the Baha'is of the world to organize special meetings of prayer around 14 May for the indomitable followers of Baha'u'llah in Iran, indeed, for all the people in that blessed land who are similarly subject to oppression, that the Hand of Divine Providence may grant them relief from their long ordeal. To this end we too offer our fervent supplications at the Sacred Threshold.

oneworldhosts

Oneworldhosts (site no longer exists) is a neat little website that was started by a Baha'i from California, with the aim of helping Baha'is who are travelling around the world. I

guess the youth would get the most out of it as travellers since they are ready pretty much to crash anywhere cheap and safe. And you can't get much cheaper than free.Oneworldhosts matches together travellers who are looking for a place to stay with hosts who are willing to provide them accomodations. The great thing about this is that it brings together Baha'is from different parts of the world who may not have had the chance to meet otherwise.

I haven't used this service myself but thought I would bring it to your attention since it is an individual initiative with the right motives and intentions. Whenever I can, I try to encourage such ventures because the Baha'i community needs more of them. Such an organization needs to garner critical mass to be able to really function at optimal. It isn't there yet but with your help it will get there sooner rather than later.

So if you are travelling or are interested in hosting a traveller get registered with them.

Bon Voyage

Paul's Story

In my previous rant on Code Reds I mentioned that I would talk about a specific case that I found out about recently. To be honest with you, I've had a difficult time in deciding whether to write about this or not. The reason is that I do not want to use the real name of the people involved and I know that right off the bat this will make it suspect to many. I suppose its about trust. Many of you may think that I'm making this up or exaggerating. But I finally decided to just tell it and let you decide.The deciding factor for me was that by telling this story, I knew it would bring to your attention the reality that many Baha'is around the world do experience Code Reds but because they decide to simply withdraw into themselves and leave the community, or to forgive and forget the transgression, you never hear about it. The cases that the Baha'i internet world is familiar with are just those who decided to make a public stand against such bullying and call the Baha'i administration to account. But I think for every one of those, there are maybe 5 or more of the non-public type. Their hurt is real and their stories are real too. But we just never hear about them.

Paul is a man who has not met a meal he didn't like in a while. He's not as round as he is tall, but he's working on it. His face is well worn with wrinkles, probably because he likes to really enunciate when he talks and probably because he can't help but smile all the time. And don't be surprised if he grabs your shoulder or nudges you when he talks. Its those times that he's trying to impress upon you an important point he's making.

Paul and his family have been Baha'is for more than 40 years now. In fact, you could say that he was one of the original pillars of his community. In those early years, he might tell you, it was glorious. There were so many teaching opportunities, so many challenges. So much to do. And teach he did. In fact, the vast majority of the Baha'is who later came into their community were either as a result of direct contact with Paul and his family or through teaching projects that he organized.

His family is now quite large. His kids have grown up and have kids of their own. This makes Paul very happy. To have a few generations around him and to see them embrace the Baha'i Faith, that is what really matters to him.

Another thing you will notice when you meet Paul is that he is a very outspoken person. If he's thinking it, he'll probably tell you about it. Maybe that's why he was such a great teacher of the Cause. He loves Baha'u'llah and often carries a book or two to read by Him in those short moments when there's nothing else to do. And he loves to quote stuff.

A few years ago Paul got into mounting trouble with the Baha'i administration. Why? I guess it was his outspoken nature. When he would see something wrong, he would bring it to the attention of the assembly and suggest they do something about it. He had been a long time member of the institution himself and couldn't understand why they didn't see the same things that he plainly saw.

And what did he see that bothered him? That the community was not growing (and in fact shrinking); that the LSA's authority had been superceded by ABM and other members of the appointed arm; that Ruhi wasn't really helping the community to grow; that the vitality which was in the community not long ago had evaporated.

As Paul kept bringing these issues up, the LSA and the ABMs became more and more uncomfortable. They just didn't want to talk about these things. They tried to tell him to just let it go. But Paul loved the Faith too much, he loved Baha'u'llah too much. He couldn't just let it go after 40 years and after seeing his community bloom and grow from

just a few Baha'is (and now decline). Paul couldn't understand why they were seeing him as a 'troublemaker'. All he was concerned about was how to help his community and Faith. Just like he had done from the first day he became a Baha'i.

So he didn't let up.

One day, not long after, he was invited to have a sit down meeting with the ABM of the area. The ABM was a young Persian man (in his late 20s) and he was sitting down in front of Paul. In that meeting the ABM explained to Paul that his pattern of behaviour and speech had been brought to his attention and that he was worried about Paul's spiritual health. He explained that Paul was walking a very fine line. That if he insisted on continuing this way there was really no other choice than to inform the Counsellors and the ITC, who would not look too kindly on the whole matter. The ABM told Paul that his conduct and speech were a sign that he was covenantally weak. And he recommended that Paul deepen about the covenant and the necessity of Baha'is to obey the institutions.

Paul was asked for the unity of the Faith and his own wellbeing to stop saying those things. To stop criticising Ruhi and questioning why the whole community should be taking the courses. And he should stop burdening the LSA with his other suggestions and ideas. The LSA knew what was best for the community and they, in consultation with the ABM would fulfil their responsabilities.

In this meeting Paul asked to see a copy of the Ruhi books. The ABM declined saying 'We know that all you want to do is to further criticise and attack the Ruhi courses. That's why I've instructed everyone to not give you or sell you any Ruhi books.' Needless to say, Paul exited that meeting quite shaken.

When he went home and told his family they had a rough time believing him. The result was that Paul's loving wife decided to withdraw from the Baha'i community and to not participate in any activities or functions. His children likewise. Only Paul himself and some of his grandchildren still come to Baha'i functions and events.

The news of this meeting quickly made its round in the community. It was all everyone could talk about. On one hand they all knew Paul and who he was, on the other hand, they also heard that the decision of the ABM was very clear. Pretty soon, people began to whisper and talk whenever Paul would raise his hand to make a suggestion at feast.

Looking into Paul's eyes, you can see the sadness this whole mess has caused him. But remarkably, you also see that he hasn't lost the twinkle that was there before. He's still in love with Baha'u'llah and he is still devoted to the Faith. He brushes aside any comments for appeal or seeking justice. He only says, these things are not important.

No related posts.

Persecution of Iranian Baha'is Linked to Hojatieh

More and more, the traditional media is awakening to the role of the Hojjatieh Society in the persecution of Baha'is. Maybe the reporters should be reading blogs to get the news a few months ahead of time.

The crack research team at Baha'i Rants was able to track down a picture of the founder of the Hojatieh Society: Shaykh Mahmoud Zaker-zadeh Toolabi, also known as Shaykh Mahmoud Halabi (prominent left):

And below is an article that appeared in *The Toronto Star* today:

Baha'is fear new persecution by Iranians
Apr. 29, 2006. 01:00 AM
STUART LAIDLAW
FAITH & ETHICS REPORTER

For a Markham woman, the afternoon of Aug. 23, 1980, is seared into her mind. That was the last day anyone saw or heard from her father, a leading member of the Baha'i faith in her native Iran, and 10 others.

"They were meeting in different places because they knew the government was after them," the woman remembers, 26 years later.

A Jeep arrived at 4 p.m. at the home where they were meeting to drag off 11 members of the Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly of Iran and the owner of the home. The homeowner was later released, but not the others.

"From that time, no one has seen or heard anything about those people," says the woman, who does not want her name used.

Her husband, also a senior official in Iran's Baha'i community before the 1979 Islamic revolution, remains a marked man, she says. The couple, who fear for their safety even in Canada, left Iran within months of the revolution; her mother was smuggled out shortly after her father's disappearance.

Now, she fears a return to the violence of a quarter-century ago, when more than 200 Baha'is were killed in the government campaign. "Among them were many of our friends and relatives. Their purpose was to eradicate the Baha'i faith.

"Yesterday, she took part in a prayer ceremony at the Baha'i Centre in downtown Toronto for the people of Iran, marking the opening of the group's annual meeting.

The prayer was held to recognize a recent upsurge in persecution of Baha'is in Iran, where the faith was founded 162 years ago, says Gerald Filson, spokesperson for the group. Asma Jahangir, the United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of religion, has said she is "highly concerned" about treatment of Baha'is in Iran after seeing a letter from a military official calling for members of the faith to be monitored.

"What's happening now is quite scary," the Markham woman told the *Star*. "They say they are monitoring the Baha'i, and that's exactly what they said the last time.

"Anti-Baha'i rhetoric has soared since the election last year of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a hardliner alleged to belong to Hojjatieh, an anti-Baha'i organization.

Baha'i teaches "progressive revelation," that Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and Baha'i founder Baha'u'llah were messengers from God and that more will come. Followers believe people must find faith through their own investigation. Islam, the religion of 98 per cent of Iranians, teaches that Muhammad is the final prophet.

About 300,000 Baha'is remain in Iran, a country of 68 million people; some five million Baha'is live abroad, including 30,000 in Canada, which accepted Iranian Baha'is as refugees in the 1980s. Persecution of Baha'is predates Iran's revolution but was stepped up in the early '80s, until international pressure forced the country to back off.

Related Links:

Canadian Baha'i News Service article: English and French

Peter Khan Passes Away

Previous member of the Universal House of Justice Peter Khan has passed away today. Over the years we've discussed Khan's extremist viewpoints more than a few times. He was also a key player in Alison Marshall's expulsion as well as the UHJ member with the portfolio of Asia sent to pummel into submission the New Zealand Baha'i community when they balked at her treatment by the institutions.

Below is the message from the UHJ:

> We grieve at the sudden passing of our dearly loved former colleague Peter J. Khan, whose many years of service in the Holy Land, concluded so recently, are still fresh in our memories. By any measure, his was a remarkable life, one of earnest striving, of unbending resolve, of unflinching dedication to principle, and of constancy of effort. Discovering the Faith in his early youth, he had an unbroken record of outstanding service that included membership of the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia, of the Auxiliary Board for Propagation in North America, of the Continental Board of Counsellors in Australasia, and of the International Teaching Centre and that culminated in his election to the Universal House of Justice on which body he served for twenty-three years. His considerable intellectual gifts manifested themselves in every

> aspect of his service to the Cause of God: in his stalwart defence of the Covenant, in the exemplary manner in which he discharged his manifold administrative duties, in his acquainting generations of youth with the transforming vision of Shoghi Effendi, in his championing the advancement of women, in his diligent attention to the stewardship of the Faith's material resources, and in his presentations of the verities of the Cause with uncommon eloquence and endearing humour to unnumbered audiences–lifting hearts, stimulating minds, galvanizing spirits. The Faith of God has lost a distinguished servant.
>
> Our condolences are extended to his beloved wife Janet, his collaborator and devoted companion. We shall offer ardent prayers at the Sacred Threshold that his illumined soul may be joyously received in the Abha Kingdom and immersed in the ocean of divine grace. We call upon the friends to hold befitting memorial gatherings in his honour throughout the Baha'i community, including in all the Houses of Worship.
>
> The Universal House of Justice

Peter Khan was a member of the UHJ from 1987 to 2009 (when he retired):

Pictures of Abdu'l-Baha

I wish I knew Abdu'l-Baha better.

Since He lived before I did, the only way I can attempt to know the man, the person, the Center of the Covenant, the Master, the Servant of God (that's what Abdu'l-Baha means in Arabic) is through the writings He left behind… and maybe through His pictures.

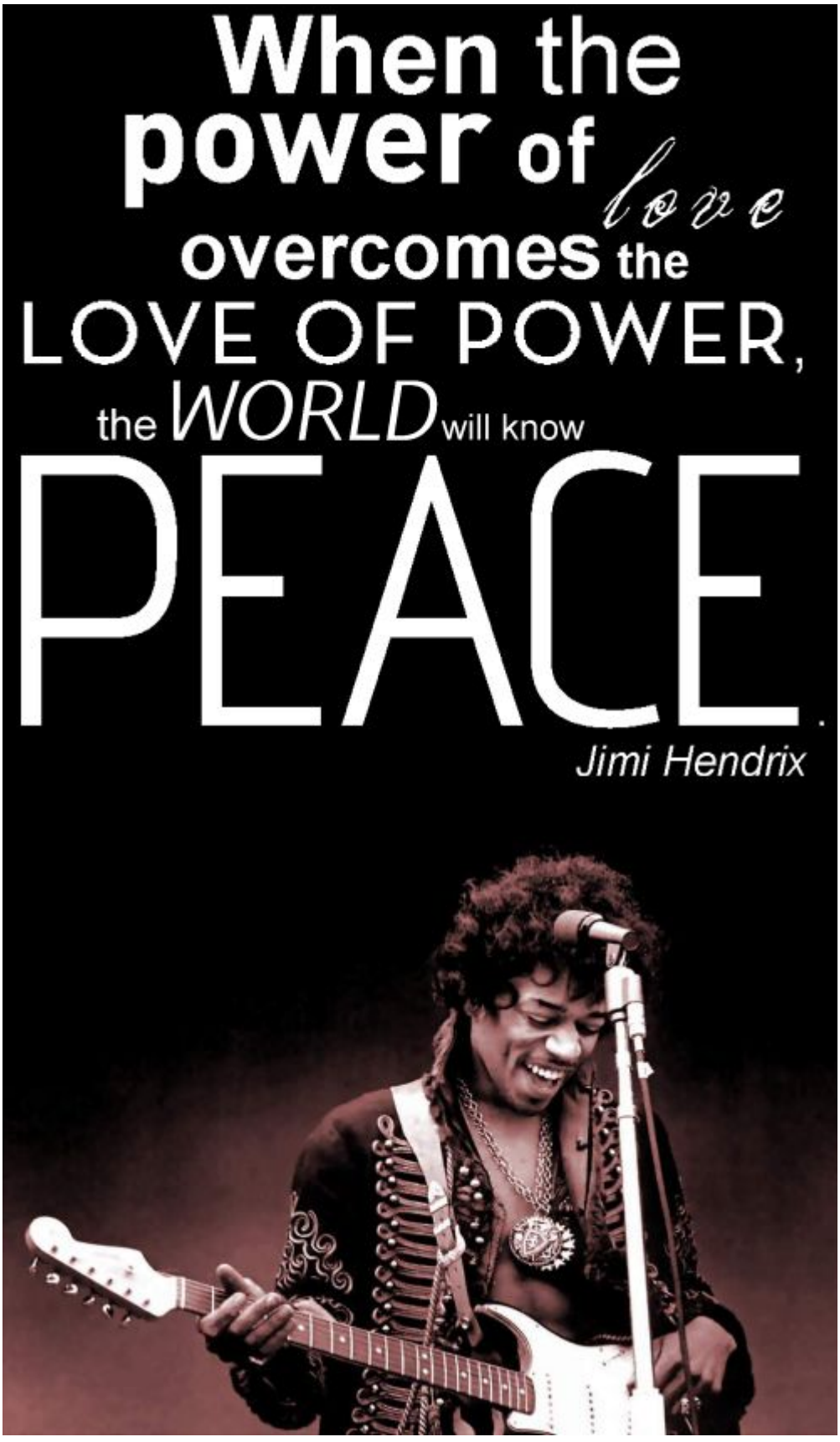
Thanks to the internet, we can all look at these rare pictures of Abdu'l-Baha… so that perhaps they whisper some insight about Him.

You can navigate using the little icons at the bottom (just move your mouse over the bottom of the black rectangle. Or you can let the slideshow flip to the next picture (customize the speed at the top left hand side).

Enjoy.

Power of Love or Love of Power?

Hope you like this little noetic eye candy I cooked up for you:


When the
power of love
overcomes the
LOVE OF POWER,
the WORLD will know
PEACE.
Jimi Hendrix

> When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace.
> *Jimmi Hendrix*

The way I see it, power is all about control. Love is all about losing control.

God's love for us is the primary force behind Creation and the fountain of mankind's nobility is free will. Which in a funny sort of way means that God gave up "control" and in a sense, put it in our own hands. We are not brute animals, controlled, lashed or beaten by God throughout our lives but instead are guided lovingly by His manifestations, through intermittent divine revelations. And yet, whether we realize it or not, we always have the freedom to choose our reactions, behavior, speech… our very lives.

You and I may not be covetous of power in the meaning that we want to rule a country or take over the world. But in our own way we each choose, moment to moment, to either let go and love; or grab on to gain and maintain control and therefore, power. Lord knows I could sure use less of the latter and a heaping spoonful of the former.

Here's the curious thing, when your power to love overcomes your love of power, something magical happens. People are drawn to you. You become a beacon, attracting others as if magnetized. They may not even know why but they sense something in you that others lack. Look at the example in the life and person of Abdu'l-Baha. Even as desiring no rank nor station beyond that of servitude, Abdu'l-Baha was so loved, revered and respected by all people.

Sounds good. Now how do we do that?

The Baha'i Faith certainly has answers – which take a lifetime to glean. These two ladies also have some ideas: Karen Armstrong + Jill Bolte Taylor

Just a little something to ponder over the weekend. Hope you all have a wonderful and restful time. It wouldn't hurt to crank up some of Jimi's music and dance like no one's watching.

“Pre-Approved” Individual Investigation of Truth?

Neysan Zoelzer-Mehrabkhani, a Baha’i from Germany has created a Baha’i search engine (through Google Co-Op) named Majn??n.

Regular Google search already does a great job of providing information, Baha’i related or otherwise.

So why do we need this service? Well, as Neysan’s site explains, Majn??n:

> Searches **approved** Baha’i-related websites only…
>
> Searches **approved** Baha’i-related blogs only.
>
> Searches **approved** Baha’i Book Stores only.

You may ask, “approved”? Approved by whom, exactly?

Well it seems by “Majn??n editors”. Whoever they may be.

The site then goes on to quote from Baha’u’llah’s mystical work, *The Seven Valleys* to explain the inspiration behind the name of the site (please read carefully):

> It is related that one day they came upon Majn??n sifting the dust, and his tears flowing down. They said, ‘What doest thou?’ He said, ‘I seek for Layla.’ They cried, ‘Alas for thee! Layla is of pure spirit, and thou seekest her in the dust!’ He said, ‘I seek her everywhere that some editors have pre-approved for me; haply somewhere within those limits I shall find her.’ Yea, although to the wise it be shameful to seek the Lord of Lords in the dust, yet this betokeneth intense ardor in searching. ‘Whoso seeketh out a thing among pre-approved websites with zeal shall find it.’

ok, that was tongue-in-cheek (for those that are bereft of a sense of humor). But I hope you get my drift.

Among the most powerful animating principles of the Baha'i Faith is the ***unfettered individual investigation of truth***.

It is truly sad that some Baha'is do not understand this fundamental feature of their Faith and through ignorance of it, do things like this.

If history teaches us anything, it is that anyone who has ever attempted to "fetter" information in any way, has failed most spectacularly.

Predicting the Future of Iran

As a Baha'i, I'm very interested to know the future direction of Iran; not only because it is the Cradle of the Faith, but because the direction that Iran takes has real effect on the lives of all Iranians and especially, the beleaguered and persecuted Baha'i community.

Here is a presentation from Bruce Bueno de Mesquita at TED on applying rational choice theory or game theory to make 3 predictions on the future of Iran. You can watch it fullscreen by clicking on the bottom right icon below:

predicting-the-future-of-iran

Bruce Bueno de Mesquita runs, Mesquita & Roundell, a consulting company and he seems to have a knack in predicting very obscure but important turning points in world events:

> His first foray into forecasting controversy took place in 1984, when he published an article in PS, the flagship journal of the American Political Science Association, predicting who would succeed Iran's ruling Ayatollah Khomeini upon his death. He had developed a rudimentary forecasting model that was different from anything anyone had seen before in that it was not designed around one particular foreign-policy problem, but could be applied to any international conflict. "It was the first attempt at a general mathematical model of international conflict," he says. His model predicted that upon Khomeini's death, an ayatollah named Hojatolislam Khamenei and an obscure junior cleric named Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani would emerge to lead the country together. At the time, Rafsanjani was so little known that his name had yet to appear in the New York Times.
>
> Even more improbably, Khomeini had already designated his successor, and it was neither Ayatollah Khamenei nor Rafsanjani. Khomeini's stature among Iran's ruling clerics made it inconceivable that they would defy their leader's choice. At the APSA meeting subsequent to the article's publication, Bueno de Mesquita was roundly denounced as a quack by the Iran experts—a charlatan peddling voodoo mathematics. "They said I was an idiot, basically. They said my work was evil, offensive, that it should be suppressed," he recalls. "It was a very difficult time in my career." Five years later, when Khomeini died, lo and behold, Iran's fractious ruling clerics chose Ayatollah Khamenei and Hashemi Rafsanjani to jointly lead the country. At the next APSA meeting, the man who had been Bueno de Mesquita's most vocal detractor raised his hand and publicly apologized to him.

Source: The New Nostradamus

The 3 predictions are:

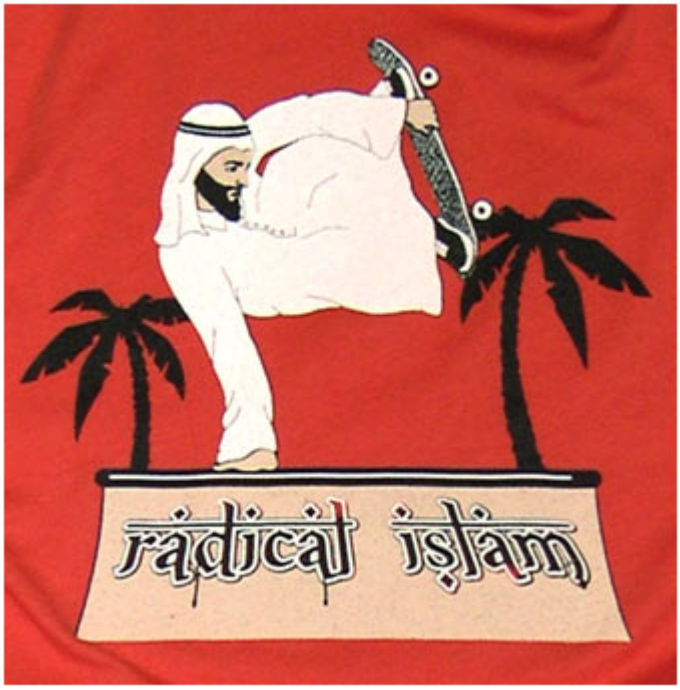
1. Iran will develop the capability and experiment but won't develop a bomb
2. Iran's theocratic ruling elite will somewhat change with the traditionalist Qom clergy and the *bazaari* or merchant class strengthening in political power

3. Ahmadinejad's star will continue to fade (presumably meaning that he will not be elected – although he didn't explicitly state this)

Foreseeably, this has several consequences for Baha'is in Iran. The first thing I noticed is that he didn't predict a downfall or even a weakening of the theocratic government of Iran. Second, the bazaari or merchant class is one of the principal agents behind the establishment and momentum of the Hojatieh Society. Any improvement in their political capital means that Baha'is will be in further peril. Finally, the prediction that Iran will stop short of developing or testing nuclear weapons means that the international community will, for the most part, continue the status quo of tolerating Iran while maintaining a watchful eye and restricting their trade access.

Although the swift reduction in the price of petroleum has severely damaged Iran's economy, according to this prediction, the theocratic regime will muddle through. Perhaps with the merchant class gaining the upper hand and implementing more market friendly policies. Whatever the details, the danger of remaining in Iran continues for Baha'is. My sincere wish is for the safety of those who are still in peril. The only sure way for them to mitigate this risk is to say farewell to Iran. And to glory not that we love Iran, but that we love all the world and humanity by finding a safe home elsewhere.

Radical Muslims



If you don’t get the joke, please find a teenager and have them explain it to you. Or you might try this one on for size:

xtremists

Who said Jihad can’t be fun?

On a more serious note:

Muslim in America: a ‘voyage of discovery’

Losing my Jihadism

No related posts.

radioNUR [part I]

radioNUR is a webcast Baha’i radio station run out of Fresno, California. It has been operating since Feb. 2002 thanks to the countless hours of work put in by its founder

Michael Eissinger, Corkey Eissinger as well as a handful of volunteers. radioNUR's content is emitted 24 hours a day and is mainly spiritually oriented music performed by Baha'i artists. But it also has non-music programming which includes children's programs, devotionals, as well as talks by the Hands of the Cause of God and audio versions of some William Sears books.As opposed to other Baha'i radio ventures (such as Payam-e-Doost), radioNUR "is not owned, operated, sponsored or controlled" by the Institutions. Evenso, its programming reflects the priorities of the Baha'i Administration; with supportive coverage of the global teaching plans, the Ruhi courses and other such topics. It has also received encouragement and guidance from the NSA of US as well as the Universal House of Justice.

In its first letter regarding radioNUR, the UHJ wrote to Michael Eissinger: "you should feel free, too, to explore the feasibility of making a commercial venture of this project." I'm not sure if Michael actually went through with a feasability study or not. But I assume he didn't because if he had, I fear he would never have had the werewithal to undertake such an audacious project.

radioNUR's plan was to rely on advertising revenue from commercial sources, mainly Baha'i related businesses. But within a year, it was evident that such revenues were not forthcoming,. This forced the young venture into financial turmoil. So much so that it approached the UHJ and requested financial assistance. Although radioNUR is a most worthy enterprise, I agree with the UHJ's decision to deny the request. Since radioNUR is a profit seeking corporation, such assistance would have been wholly innapropriate.

Although all start-ups have a challenging time getting off the ground, the majority of radioNUR's financial difficulties can be attributed to the basic assumption underlying their business plan: that they could attract Baha'i owned and related businesses to buy air time. At first, one would think this would be a match made in heaven as no other media is targeted specifically to nor reaches, Baha'is all around the world. However, there is a clear mismatch between the needs of such businesses and the audience which radioNUR provides. While the listeners are dispersed around the world (in 110 countries), most businesses that are interested in reaching a Baha'i audience are local ventures and depend on customers geographically close to them. One could argue, with the advent of the internet and online shopping, this has changed. But sadly for radioNUR, not enough. Finally, the number of such businesses that exist, as well as the number of them which

would have an advertising budget, is too low to be able to create a significant revenue stream.

After failing to attracting commercial interest, as per their original business plan, radioNUR then tried several new things: affiliate programs with other online companies, merchandising (t-shirts, mugs, etc.), an online bookstore, an online music store, and radioNUR records. But unfortunately most, if not all of these stop-gap measures, rather than helping, resulted in further losses.

Today, these early financial challenges have intensified to such a degree that they have put radioNUR in danger of bankruptcy. Recently, Michael Eissinger wrote a frank and open letter to his audience and told them of radioNUR's predicament; if itsfinancial position didn't improve dramatically, radioNUR could be relegated to a "historical footnote" in a matter of months.

Also included in this letter, was the dramatic decision of the current owners to invite new equity partners to join them and therefore build up a financial reserve which would give radioNUR a cushion with which to continue operating. The current owners hold 100,000 shares themselves and are offering to sell blocks of 10,000 shares at a price of $1/share. As radioNUR is a for profit corporation (incorporated in the State of California with 1 million common shares issued) that price would value the company at $1 million – assuming that there are no other classes of shares, bonds, debentures or convertibles, of course.

Michael and the other equity owners of radioNUR readily admit that any new investment in radioNUR at this juncture would be motivated more by the heart than the pocketbook. Even so, it is not reasonable to value a company that was started with approximately $60,000 seed capital, one that has no significant fixed assets, one with a history of losses and one that is in imminent danger of insolvency, at such a lofty number. I fear that such a staggering valuation gap between the intrinsic worth of the company and $1 million will present an insurmountabe obstacle for even the most kind hearted individual.

So what is a fair valuation? I'm not really able to arrive at an informed conclusion because valuation is both an art and a science. There are many things which can be quantified (equipment, inventory, etc.) but others which are notorious to quantify (the value of the radioNUR name, logo, and goodwill accrued over the years) My guess, (a blind man groping in a dark room) would be somewhere in the $90-110,000 range. And that is quite

generous because I'm biased; I like the nature of the business and wish to honour the hardwork of those involved.

I do know that the decision for any entrepreneur to invite new partners, and dilute their own holdings in a venture, is usually a bitter conclusion that is arrived at only when things look desperately bleak. Yet, this newest solution is just as superficial as the past ones and I fear it will do no better at making a positive and lasting difference in the fate of radioNUR.

I hope I don't appear unkind when I discuss these matters so bluntly. But the solution of selling equity is truly cosmetic because it does not at all address the real problem at radioNUR; the continuing shortfall between revenues and expenses. Instead it seeks to simply gather up more assets so that they can then be lost, drip by drip, through the unprofitable operation of the company. Even if the already mentioned valuation gap didn't exist, no intelligent investor would contribute to an enterprise organized in this way because it only means delaying the demise of the venture a little longer, rather than securing its future survival and growth.

As well, I would caution radioNUR regarding the language used to offer its common shares for sale. I'm not a securities lawyer, but unless radioNUR is filing under the SEC's California Limited Offering Exemption- Rule 1001, the wording on their website may be illegal. And even under Rule 1001, the securities can not be sold or even offered to residents of other states without first receiving an exemption or registration from those states. In any case, it would be prudent to soften the wording in the public letter to not be so solicitous, remove specific references to quantities and prices/share and (as required by law) feature a prominent phone number at which interested parties can obtain further information.

In and of itself, raising equity is not a bad idea at all. As long as we consider first: a more reasonable pricing of the equity shares, a careful approach to selling the shares (in keeping with SEC regulations and state laws) and most importantly, setting up the company on a course which would, at minimum, allow it to operate at break-even and stop the hemorrhage. When these issues are successfully dealt with, attracting new investors will be a much easier endeavor and lead to a lasting and effective solution.

All in all, I actually do think this challenging situation can be turned around. As to how, I'll leave that for the second installment.

radioNUR [part II]

Often, the way that a problem is defined is the problem. In radioNUR's case, the problem is that mangement thinks their only problem is lack of money (and therefore, the solution is more money).This is the problem. As long as they believe this is what they should be solving, radioNUR will be in dire straits (or may very well disappear altogether). Profit is only a consequence of running a successful venture. A by product, if you will. So then, the solution must address why the current incarnation of radioNUR isn't successful and what can we do about it. I've come up with a few thoughts and suggestions on how this can be done. They are under three main headings: marketing, programming and structure.

Marketing and Promotion

The aim of these suggestions is to increase the audience base of radioNUR among Baha'is around the world. There are still many Baha'is (in developed/ing countries) which have not heard of radioNUR; there really is no excuse for that. Thankfully, this is one of radioNURs least worries as its audience has been growing pretty steadily ever since its founding and even after all the financial difficulties, its ranking on live365 is very respectable.

radioNUR's website needs to be redesigned to be more user-friendly and attractive. I made a little test by asking a few friends to go to radioNUR's website and asked them to listen to radioNUR's broadcast. I then timed them to see how long it would take. On average it took them 3-4 minutes to figure out what they had to do and where they had to click (the computer had all the necessary software). One of the guinea pigs in fact gave up (and no these were not technophobes or ignoramuses). The website needs to provide a prominent method for gaining access to the broadcast (huge red button?). Maybe a visit to this guy is in order. This suggestion is very important because you only have one chance to make a first impression and when you're a web-based business, that happens when your audience visits your site. If you confuse, confound and frustrate them, that is probably the last time they will be there.

radioNUR should then seek to attract visitors on the web by placing its link on other Baha'i websites. There are hundreds of Baha'i websites (persons and organizations) that still don't have any link to radioNUR. Also, radioNUR can create a small icon which can be placed on other websites and act as a link to their Sponsorship webpage. radioNUR should write

(email) Baha'i communities around the world and ask them to inform their members about radioNUR.

radioNUR should use Google AdSense on its website to create a small stream of cashflow. This revenue stream may not be significant but it does allow the audience a way to make the smallest but still practical contribution (by clicking on the ads whenever they visit to launch the applet). As well, the dollar amount will grow as radioNUR's audience grows.

radioNUR should also enable more interaction between itself and its listeners as well as between the listeners themselves. Interactivity is important because it creates a sense of community. The only way to keep your audience (both online and offline) coming back is to provide the means to establish relationships. radioNUR can encourage this by continuing to ask for feedback, responding to feedback, running contests, creating a 'call-in' or 'email-in' show, reading emails from listeners on the air, and by adding a messageboard to its website.

radioNUR should consider selling its CD compilations through the Baha'i distribution networks around the world. This may not garner it much of a profit (then again it may) but at least it will make people familiar with the name radioNUR. As well, radioNUR might consider donating (at cost) merchandise to Baha'i institutions so it can be used as fundraising merchandise. This will garner goodwill and again, publicity.

On-Air Programming

I suspect that the majority of radioNUR's audience is comprised of young adults (teenagers to 40′s), since they have access to the internet and the know-how to access internet radio. And although I'm sure that they are happy with the programming on radioNUR, that does not mean that with a few changes, they could not be happier.

radioNUR after all is a specialty radio channel and must offer something special to its audience. They can always just turn on the regular radio to get popular music. What they seek, by turning to radioNUR is, of course, something else.

In keeping with the suggestions to increase interactivity with the audience, radioNUR should increase its non-music programming. Since radioNUR has a 24 continuous program schedule, it should have no problem adapting to a 40-45% non-music schedule. This allows for the audience to receive something from radioNUR which they wouldn't get elsewhere:

Baha'i related non-musical programming. This can be in several sections, for example, programming for parents, youth, Persian speakers, couples, humour, and news. It should, however, maintain its main focus on English language programming. This will allow it to reach its main audience (in the US, Canada, India, UK, Ireland, Australia, NZ, Netherlands and northern Europe) while keeping production costs low.

Specialty programs for segments of their audience, for example, the Persian believers, can be achieved at a fairly low cost by airing the classes of Dr. Ghadimi or doing audio versions of Andalib articles (with permission). As well, radioNUR can conduct 'interviews' with Baha'i artists, writers, scholars and others. Other sections can be dedicated, for example, to interesting stories from the history of the Faith or community life. As well, radioNUR can use its own listeners base to keep Baha'is abreast of local and national Baha'i news of importance.

The purpose of all of the suggestions above is to create an interactive community where radioNUR's audience around the world can not only get Baha'i related music but much, much more. This will in turn spur an increase in the audience base because there really isn't anything remotely like this offering out there right now.

Structure

I know that by now I must sound like a broken record but I repeat that radioNUR's request for for money or fresh capital is a band-aid solution because it does not resolve the underlying problem: radioNUR is not generating enough cash to sustain itself. It is clear by now that radioNUR is not going to be supported by businesses and therefore can not sustain itself by continuing to rely on this model.

While the number of advertisers has been in a steady decline (having fallen from a high of almost 70 in early 2003 to a low of approximately 15 in late 2004) the audience of radioNUR has been either stable or growing slightly. So we know that people are interested to listen to the radio but businesses are not interested to advertise on it. This apparent paradox may actually contain, within itself, the answer.

Its interesting to note that of all the different steps taken to "plug the holes" early on (affiliate programs with other online companies, merchandising, an online bookstore, an online music store, and radioNUR records), only one helped.

That was the decision to approach the listeners directly and ask them to buy "sponsorships". These non-commercial entities (Baha'i individuals, localities and institutions) responded positively and began to buy air-time mentions of themselves. In fact, the bulk of radioNUR's operating revenue today comes from such "sponsorships" and by the management's own admission, it is only by the grace of the positive response to the "sponsorship" program by the listeners that radioNUR has managed to stay on the air.

While the temporary salvation of radioNUR has been the buying up of these "sponsorship" air time, they are, for all intents and purposes, donations. The people, communities and assemblies buying them do not profit, in the traditional sense , except by knowing that they are helping radioNUR stay on the air (I doubt that anyone is so egocentric to simply want to hear their own name on air).

This of course creates an incongruency: charity given to a for-profit corporation. That is why radioNUR must change its structure to match the realities of its situation and become a not-for-profit corporation.

As well as bringing congruency back to their venture, this change will bring many other benefits. For one, they will be explicitly relying on their listeners, the only stakeholders who have from the beginning supported this venture and continue to do so. Actually, the audience will support radioNUR more once they know that it is a not a for-profit venture and it is, in fact, they who will profit by its continued operation and growth. And while this change will increase listener's support, it won't alienate commercial advertisers. Let's face it, businesses don't really care if they are advertising on a for-profit or not-for-profit medium, as long as they get through to their target audience. radioNUR will also see other, less tangible, benefits – such as being able to attract volunteers more readily.

With these suggestions and changes, radioNUR will be able to attract new investors because they present a reasonable valuation as well as a realistic way to achieve an increase in the audience base and a way to turn cashflow positive. I am realistic enough to admit that eventhought this is the best course, it is probably the most difficult change to acknowledge and implement for radioNUR's owners.

Michael and others have put a lot of blood, sweat and tears into radioNUR and I, along with a lot of other Baha'is around the world, would be very sorry to see all it all dissapear

into a “footnote of history”. But as in any instance in life where a challenge presents itself, there is also an opportunity to snatch from the jaws of defeat an even greater victory.

The greatest opporunity that I see for radioNUR is to become a medium for Baha’is all around the world to experience a new sense of community. radioNUR has a singular chance to give the Baha’i community what it lacks, a free, independant and objective media. All the present medium of communication within the Baha’i community are under the auscpices of institutions (all local, national and international Baha’i media are supervised by their respective LSAs, NSAs or the BWC).

The content and style of these official media are saccharine. They present a cartoonish view of the Baha’i community where everything and everyone is in a total state of bliss. By only reporting positive news, events, and analysis with glowing vocabulary, they create a disconnect from reality as experienced by the average Baha’i in their community. Such bias actually does the whole community a disservice because it causes alienation, confusion and removes any opportunity for introspection and consultation on difficult issues facing most Baha’i communities. Therefore, there is no real chance for growth or maturation as a community.

While the pre-publication review is a very harmful type of censorship imposed mostly on Baha’i scholars, writers and artists, this type of implicit, and often, self-imposed bowlderization does much more harm because it effects everyone in the Baha’i community. We all feel as if saying or reporting a mistake, failure or scandal is taboo. But, very often, it is through just such troubling things that real growth takes place.

Interestingly, Baha’u’llah was a critic of this because He, Himself, was the target of such biased reporting. He often had to endure the calumny, unfounded rumours and half-truths that were printed in the papers of that time in Egypt, Palestine and elsewhere:

Concerning this Wronged One, most of the things reported in the newspapers are devoid of truth. Fair speech and truthfulness, by reason of their lofty rank and position, are regarded as a sun shining above the horizon of knowledge . . . It is reported in the press that this Servant hath fled from the land of T?? (Tihr??n) and gone to "Ir??q. Gracious God! Not even for a single moment hath this Wronged One ever concealed Himself.

Baha’u’llah instructs the writers for the newspapers, saying:

In this Day the secrets of the earth are laid bare before the eyes of men. The pages of swiftly-appearing newspapers are indeed the mirror of the world. They reflect the deeds and the pursuits of divers peoples and kindreds. They both reflect them and make them known. They are a mirror endowed with hearing, sight and speech. This is an amazing and potent phenomenon. However, it behoveth the writers thereof to be purged from the promptings of evil passions and desires and to be attired with the raiment of justice and equity. They should enquire into situations as much as possible and ascertain the facts, then set them down in writing.

Sadly, current Baha'i journalists and writers (for the official publications) are not following this guidance. I suppose in their attempt to show piety and goodwill towards the Faith, they are doing a wrong just as egregious as that done by the journalists that Baha'u'llah refers to above. They are subjecting His Faith to biased reporting (not a negative but rather an extremely positive bias instead).

It is inevitable that a growing Baha'i world wide community would have such an independant, and objective medium of communication. And radioNUR's chosen method of transmission is ideal as it has low fixed costs, an egalitarian world-wide reach, immediate turn-around time and the inspiration that can only be provided by voice and music. So if you are a like minded Baha'i and wish to support such a voice for the Baha'i community, put money where their mouth is and contact radioNUR. You'll be surprised that many other Baha'is around the world share your convictions.

radioNUR Website Hacked, Now Back To Normal

radionur-hacked-attack-site-warning.

I went to check up on radioNUR's website recently and because I'm using Firefox, I was shown this warning. I've removed the website URL which shows up in the warning because it is another attack site and if people don't have up to date protection, their computers can get infected.

Apparently radioNUR's website was recently hacked and taken over for some nefarious reason. It seems that they are back up and trying to clean up after the fact. I hope they are ok and can recover from this. They are a small operation that does good work and don't really need this headache.

I'm not sure if they are struggling financially as they were before but I'm glad to see that Michael's project continues to operate. Way back when I started writing this Baha'i blog, radioNUR was going through some extreme financial pressures and I offered some ideas and suggestions: radioNUR part I and radioNUR part II.

Unfortunately, not only have they not taken any of my suggestions regarding improving their useability but they've somehow managed to make it even more challenging for their listeners to tune in. Sheesh.

But if any Baha'is out there have money simply burning a hole in their wallets, consider buying a donation or ads on radioNUR. And if you are a fan of Baha'i Rants, you could do worse than buy an ad to mention and promote this blog on radioNUR 😉

Or you can simply tune in and listen to the broadcast when you're online. If you can make heads or tails of the instructions.

Rainn Wilson Mentions the Baha'i Faith

Rainn Wilson clowns around with Craig Ferguson on the Late Late Show. He is doing the talk show rounds to promote his movie The Last Mimzy and towards the end he is asked about his Faith.

Here's an interview he did at the US Baha'i Website.

The Baha'i TV stars are really starting to pile up. Omid Djalili, Bevin from *The Bachelor* and now Rainn Wilson.

Rainn Wilson on Real Time with Bill Maher

The Baha'i actor, Rainn Wilson, appeared on Real Time with Bill Maher on November 10th 2006. Rain was a guest along with CNN's Candy Crowley, and infamous author Salman Rushdie.

If you're not familiar with the show, it is a satirical look at the US political landscape. Bill Maher takes no prisoners as his acid tongue lashes out at the idiocy found in government, whether Democratic or Republican.

This show aired immediately after the elections for the congress where the Democrats regained majority. A lot of hopes were raised at that time that this would mean some changes for government policy. Especially towards Iraq.

Its interesting to hear Rainn making comments regarding politics. Hope he doesn't get in trouble with his LSA for being politically active 😉

Oh and in case your are of the uber-sensitive disposition, be aware that this is a cable show (HBO) so there are some naughty words that you wouldn't normally hear on American TV.

Don't miss part #6 "New Rules". Its probably the best part of the show!

Part #3

Part #1

Part #2

Part #4

Part #5

Part #6

Rainn Wilson Stars in The Last Mimzy

Rainn Wilson stars in his latest feature movie, The Last Mimzy. To not spoil it for you I'll just mention that it is a combination of 'Alice Through the Looking Glass' and 'Encounters of the Third Kind'. Here's a still of Rainn from the movie:

The movie is set to be released after Naw-Ruz. Here's the trailer:

Rainn Wilson's Soulpancake on Oprah

If you haven't been following the launch of Rainn Wilson's new website, soulpancake.com then you haven't missed much because up until today it wasn't more than a sign-up page. But now, it is finally here and you can signup, join, and take part in the conversation.

Rainn Wilson's aim is to create a place to really delve into spirituality, religion and all those questions about God, the meaning of life, the universe, everything…

Here is Part 1 of his sit down interview with Oprah to introduce the site and the inspiration for this project (the Baha'i Faith):

Part 2

Part 3

Part 4

Part 5

Part 6

Part 7

Recent Baha'i Arrests Tied To Shiraz Bomb Blast

According to an article on May 17th, 2008 in the Iranian newspaper the *Quds Daily*, the reason for the recent arrest of seven Baha'is is suspicion of involvement in last month's bomb explosion.

You'll recall that there was an explosion in a Shiraz mosque on April 12th – at the time a part of me hoped that the Islamic Regime in Iranian would not use it as a pretense to crack down on Baha'is there.

Although initial news reports mentioned the blast as a bomb attack, the official response following the event blamed improperly stored ordinance inside the mosque and classify it as an accident.

However, less than 3 weeks later official sources in Iran changed their tune saying that it was a terrorist act. Interior Minister Mostafa Pour Mohammadi blamed the blast on “monarchists” and “enemies of the Iranian people”.

Intelligence Minister Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejeie also mentioned that people had already been arrested in connection with the explosion.

The only group to have claimed responsibility is the UK based “Kingdom Assembly of Iran” who issued this press release.

It is very difficult to get a clear sense of anything from the Iran regime and this is mostly by design. The Islamic regime revels in confusing and befuddling everyone, including themselves on occasion. There is such varying and competing agendas within the government that it really depends who you listen to and on which day.

My personal conviction was from the very start that the blast in Shiraz was a terrorist act and that calling it an “accident” was a convenient way for the Iranian regime to appear impregnable until they could calculate a means to extract further means to use it to their advantage.

Similarly the attempt to tie this tragic event with the Baha’i community in Iran is yet another tactic which affords them the convenience of deflecting international pressure regarding the arrest of the national Baha’i administrative group. They no longer have to answer to the world community on charges of religious persecution.

They can now use the smoke screen of national security to hold the 7 Baha’is and who knows, perhaps make further arrests and ratchet up the already alarming level of persecution of Baha’is in Iran.

Of course, the Baha'i Faith does accept and prefer monarchy (as a symbolic station devoid of civil authority) but no one except the most fanatic and ignorant Muslims would believe that the Baha'i Faith would in any way shape or form condone violence. On the contrary, we have clear and repeated guidance to uphold the laws of the country in which we live and to respect civil authority. This is something that the Baha'i community of Iran has been doing since its founding, even when under severe oppression.

I continue to beg my fellow Baha'is inside Iran to leave and start productive lives in the many alternative civilized countries around the world – for themselves and their children.

UPDATE:
Thanks to Bahaisonline.net for pointing out that the Baha'i International Community has now responded to the IRI's allegations and rejected them completely.

I don't think they will persuade anyone but fellow fundamentalist Islamic regimes (who would support them in the UN in any case) in arguing that the Baha'is had something to do with the Shiraz explosion last month. In any case, a civilized country that respects basic human rights would swiftly bring on charges and commence a fair and transparent trial. The charges of "Zionism" ring hollow and underscore the Iranian government's moral as well as creative bankruptcy.

Reflections on 3 Years of Blogging

I can't believe it has been 3 years since I started writing. I don't make it a habit to lapse into navel gazing but since we are at a sort of road marker, perhaps you will be so kind as to overlook this weakness.

Yes, really. Its been three whole years (and a fraction more). This is what I wrote as my first foray into this uncharted territory: Introduction.

Since then, I've gotten a lot off my chest – as they say. Unfortunately, I've been given reason to say things. For example the whole Kalimat Press boycott, I'd rather not be handed such material by the Baha'i powers that be. However, when they do such knuckle-headed things, I can't help but rant about it.

Positively Negative

I'm not sure how much I've ranted and how much I've been actually coherent. One thing I'd like to do is to be more positive and to see the lighter side of things. The primary reason why I haven't done more of this is that there are already a plethora of wide eyed and bushy tailed Baha'i bloggers who do nothing but that.

I'd rather be a unique voice and stay true to myself. This doesn't mean that I don't see the good or that I don't celebrate the positive events of my faith along with my fellow believers. But that I see no point in being the 16th blogger to write about Nouruz.

So what some may interpret as being excessively negative, is in reality my attempt to bring some sort of attention to things that I believe need attention desperately.

When I do write about positive things, you can bet it will be something no one else is mentioning

The Song Remains The Same

Sadly, not much has changed within the Baha'i community from three years ago. Oh sure, things have been rearranged but the change is superficial.

None of the really important issues which have made appearances on Baha'i Rants have been addressed. If anything, things have been going the other way.

That's A Lot of Zeros

Which might explain a surprising fact: people are actually reading my blog.

To be specific, in 2006 Baha'i Rants got more than 200,000 pageviews. And in 2007, 400,000 pageviews. And every month the traffic is growing, even when I don't write much. Or maybe *because* I don't write much.

I certainly never thought this would happen nor that it would be even possible for such a micro-niche blog to get such traffic!

I'm not a competitive person, nor is this a race but my traffic easily trounces the largest and most well known traditional Baha'i blogs. I won't mention them to protect the innocent – but they know who they are

I don’t think it is a reflection on this blog, or the quality of its content but rather the interest that Baha’is have taken in this medium of communication. The search engine traffic and the keywords that bring people to my blog is astounding.

Baha’is find this blog because they feel the same way I do about things and are out here on the internet — the only open and free platform for exchange of ideas — seeking more information and perhaps like minded peers.

As Shoghi Effendi wrote in 1931:

> A mechanism of world inter-communication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity.

They’re still working on the “national hinderances” in places like China and Iran. But as prophecies go, it’s a pretty darned good one. And here we are, you and I, communicating through it. It certainly is marvelous, isn’t it?

And just look at how many different countries you all come from!

All the large English speaking countries, as well as European ones (I guess they know English or use an online translator?) but also there are readers from the Middle East: UAE, Iran, Israel (big smile and wave to the good folks on top of Mount Carmel).

	Countries
	United States
	New Zealand
	Canada
	Unknown
	Netherlands
	Australia
	European country
	Sweden
	Great Britain
	Singapore
	Germany
	United Arab Emirates
	Israel
	Iran
	Hong Kong
	China
	Belgium
	Brazil
	Malaysia
	Ireland
	Czech Republic
	Spain
	South Korea
	France
	Trinidad and Tobago

I can understand the curiosity when this humble scribe is anonymous. If you are really curious and want to find out more, read "Who is Baquia?"

I just noticed that a fellow Baha'i blogger has plopped me down into the apostate category. Thanks Moojan! Lovely addition to the Baha'i lexicon and a wonderful legacy for yourself as a theologian.

Believe it or not, I'm a Baha'i. Fully enrolled and in good standing. But since when has that ever stopped a fellow Baha'i from casting stones?

Which brings us full circle because this whole thing, the blog, my thoughts, my anguish at the way the Baha'i Faith is careening outside the path it once travelled… it was all started quite innocuously when a fellow Baha'i by the name of Dr. Susan Maneck viciously attacked me in an online discussion.

I was taken aback by such treatment because online or off, no one had ever twisted my words, perverted my intentions and poured such personal hate on me. It caused me to

wonder what was really under it all. The discussion we were engaged in was benign – so why such a harsh reaction?

That's when I decided to give this more attention and stumbled in short order on such chapters of history as the LA Class in the 1970′s, the Dialogue magazine mess, the Talisman crackdown, the practice of "unenrollment" and others (Karen deals with most of the big ones here). So in essence I owe Dr. Maneck a heartfelt thank you. Her words on that day helped to open my eyes – when they may never have been. Who knows, I may have turned into one of those Ruhi-parroting "good" Baha'is. So thank you Dr. Maneck. THANK YOU !!

Ah, well. Enough navel gazing for now.

Religious Tolerance

HEY, WANNA COME TO MY BAR MITZVAH ON SATURDAY?
I WANT TO, BUT I GAVE UP RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE FOR LENT.
LENT'S BEEN OVER FOR LIKE A MONTH.
YEAH, ACCORDING TO THOSE CATHOLICS...
Cyanide and Happiness © Explosm.net

Credit: Cyanide & Happiness

No related posts.

Renovation of National Baha'i Center in Suriname

The National Baha'i Center in Suriname requires renovation and the Universal House of Justice has assigned the task of raising the necessary funds (€13,000 or appx. $18,000 Canadian dollars) to two National Spiritual Assemblies: Netherlands and Canada.

The choice of the Netherlands is understandable considering that Suriname was claimed as a colony by the Dutch in 1667 and only gained its independence on November 25 1975. Dutch is still their official language.

The choice of Canada however is puzzling. There is no connection between the two countries other than Canada being a wealthier nation that can afford to support the renovation effort.

But if that is the only criteria that makes sense, the Universal House of Justice could have easily asked any number of countries that are wealthy to send them the funds. Why not the US? Japan? Germany?

Bahai Center in Paramaribo Suriname

Suriname is a tiny country (the smallest in South America) with less than half a million citizens which live mostly in Paramaribo – the capital city along the North coast.

It would even make more sense to ask a country in the same continent. For example, Brazil or Venezuela. Or Chile (oh, right, they're kind of busy with their own project).

Perhaps the Universal House of Justice is keeping close tabs on the financial state of the Baha'i community in Canada and knows they can easily afford it.

For more information, here is the website of the Baha'i community of Suriname.

Renovation of the Shrine of the Bab Complete

The comprehensive restoration work of the Shrine of the Bab has been finished ahead of schedule. The total cost of the project was $6 million USD.

You can view pictures of the ongoing restoration of the Shrine here as well as a slideshow of the original building construction.

The restoration was cosmetic as well as structural. The structural additions reinforced the structure from top to bottom to be able to withstand an earthquake. The cosmetic changes were myriad. The most visible change was the installation of new tiles atop the famous golden dome of the building.

As with the other buildings on Mount Carmel, the harsh Haifa air, heavily laden with corrosive salt and other chemicals from the refinery and industrial complexes in the Haifa bay area had damaged the golden glazing of the tiles at the top of the Shrine.

The official press release from the Baha'i News Service includes this about the cause of the restoration:

> More than 50 years of exposure to Haifa's climate and environmental conditions had taken their toll on the superstructure's stonework and dome…

According to Mr. Saeid Samadi, the architect and project leader based out of California, the new gold glazed tiles sourced from Portugal are manufactured to be able to withstand the harsh conditions of the Haifa bay. His estimation is that they will last from 200 to 300 years.

Below is a slideshow of the unveiling and the newly restored building:

As well as being a holy site for Baha'is, the Shrine of the Bab is a major tourist attraction and a designated world heritage site by UNESCO.

Reports Show Communities Ignoring Ruhi

During the last Baha'i National Convention, Bill Davis addressed the convention attempting to re-direct their attention away from the NSA's own annual report, which presented an honest assessment of the situation on the ground in Baha'i communities in the US, to the letter from the UHJ directing Baha'is to "stay the course".

Towards the end of the remarks Bill Davis says (4:37):"We do not want to find ourselves pushing a rewind button and arguing over core curriculum and Ruhi."

If you have no idea what this is about, then this short summary should be illuminating.

The reason that excerpt stands out for me is that it means there *were* disagreements over Ruhi and core curriculum with some obviously feeling very strongly against it. And so much so that the NSA as a body wrote that letter basically calling both Ruhi and core curriculum, bunk. But the UHJ came down on them like a tonne of bricks. Sending an enforcer to oversee the National Convention from the ITC as well as erasing the NSA's own annual report and replacing it with their own.

I've uploaded the annual report for the largest Baha'i community in Canada. The most interesting part is *Appendix 5* on page 3 which outlines the results of the implementation of the core activities for the past 5 Baha'i years, from 2004 to 2008.

I thought it may be fruitful in our discussions of Ruhi, the core curriculum and their acceptance by the community. According to the data in this report, there are

It is fascinating that after so many years and after such an intense focus and increasing insistence upon these rote activities, it has only resulted in about a third of the community to complete Book 1 of Ruhi and less than a tenth to complete Book 7.

Book 5 is also especially rejected/ignored by the community since only a handful have completed it. Book 5 is Raising up Animators of Junior Youth Groups. It may be because it was once a part of Book 3 and in 2005 inserted as its own 'Book'.

> "We welcome the decision of the Institute…to move the book currently occupying the fifth position in the sequence to a set of courses branching out from Book 3 for preparing Baha'i Children's class teachers and to insert in the

> fifth place a new book for raising up animators of junior youth groups."
> - Letter from the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 28 December 2005

Or perhaps because it is a specialized 'course' only a few people are interested to take it or need to take it to become 'junior youth animators'.

In most communities, Ruhi is presented as a cumulative course and an individual can only take a subsequent book or course if they have done a previous one. So the fact that only about a hundred or so out of more than 1500 Baha'is (adults and youth) is very telling.

It is well known and accepted that for almost all Baha'i communities, there is a range of accuracy when it comes to membership data. The larger the community, the more difficult to get a truly accurate measure of membership. So instead of the 1560 number which includes all adults and youth, a more accurate number would be those with "good" addresses who still consider themselves Baha'is.

So lets be kind and estimate a more accurate measure of the population of Baha'is in this community by going with the number of people who have contributed to the Fund at least once during the year. This isn't a perfect qualifier but it does mean that we are counting those who are, at minimum, involved with the community emotionally and physically. That number is roughly 40% or roughly 620 people. That gives us about 21% of these 'active' members having done the full Ruhi courses.

Is that a "success" or "failure"? Ultimately that will depend on your views about Ruhi and your built in biases. Some will say that is a resounding success while others will see it as utter failure. Since the conclusion relies on what or how we define success or failure, it is open to debate.

Personal I think that it would be a stretch to call this a success. After all, the active membership of the community would as easily and exuberantly take up tether ball or bird-watching if they were directed to do so in the same fervor and intensity that the ITC and UHJ has pushed Baha'is to take up Ruhi.

For me, among other measures, success should be demonstrated by how many regularly inactive Baha'is are drawn to Ruhi and finish it. After all, they are 60% of the community. As well, I have to wonder, if Ruhi is the bees knees, why haven't 100% of 'active' Baha'is

completed it. It has been ongoing for, what? 8 years now. How many years will it take to convince the most loyal and active membership? And if Ruhi can not hold their attention or inspire these most loyal and devoted Baha'is, what hope does it have for the less active? the less devoted?

While the above example comes from one of the wealthiest and most developed countries in the world, we have another from a very different part of the world which shows remarkably similar levels of rejection for Ruhi. I say this because many believe that while Ruhi may be ineffective for western cultures, it is useful for less developed ones.

From the international convention held recently to elect the membership of the Universal House of Justice, we have official reports that in India, more than 80,000 people have completed a Ruhi course, and some 6,000 people have completed all seven books in the series.

That number may seem amazingly large… until you consider that there are by some accounts 1.8 million Baha'is in India. So let's see, that would mean that less than 4.5% have done one single Ruhi course and about 0.0033% have done all 7.

Another idea is that while there may have been growth in devotional meetings and other worship related social events, how do we know if this was brought about as a consequence of Ruhi or core curriculum? how do we separate causation with just correlation?

Finally, what no one can answer is what benefits and successes the community has given up by diverting attention to this end. How many individual initiatives were ignore? how many unrelated projects were sidelined in the single-minded quest to press everyone to walk in lock-step? Take a look at this 1987 document full of recommendations for the revitalization of the American Baha'i community.

I wonder how many more years of this we will have to endure until this latest fad is finally dropped for its obvious ineffectiveness and rejection by the Baha'i community?

The problem is that there is group think gripping the highest levels of Baha'i administration. This is not the same as unity. For unity allows diversity of thought, action and methods. Instead, through the trend of ITC members being elected to the UHJ, and then turning around and appointing ITC members… we have now a situation where there

are many individuals at the highest levels of office who have a very personal vested interest in the success of Ruhi.

It is not an impartial question or concept. It is deeply embedded and deeply part of their contribution to the Baha'i world community. For it to be seen to have failed, or for them to admit that it has failed or been rejected by the membership, is not just a simple realization. It means accepting that their contribution has fallen short. Most people simply can not take that. Compound that by several like minded individuals and you have: group think.

No where is the death grip of group-think more apparent than the categorical denial by the UHJ/ITC of the report prepared by the NSA. Who is more adept at gathering, analyzing and reporting what is going on within a community? the community itself? or a body that is half-way around the world?

Oh, right. Silly me. I'm trying to see with my own eyes and hear with mine own ears.

Resignations and Arrests Connected?

What started it all seems to have been the arrest of several Baha´is in Iran and the apparently concomitant resignation of two long serving members of the UHJ. A source, not known for 100% accuracy made this interesting observation and was derided until a few days later when official confirmation arrived in a curtly worded press release.I don´t really want to get into this situation as it has already been discussed in depth in various other blogs and in the varied Baha´i discussion forums. I just want to add that there *is* a much larger story here and that perhaps with time, we will find out what is really going on.

There is no question that whoever these Baha´is were (either foreigners or native Iranians), they were under the direct supervision of the ITC/UHJ. No Baha´i dares take any trip to Iran without informing their NSA (as instructed by the UHJ). As well, the recent letter addressed to Baha´is outside of Iran clearly discouraged them from even travelling to Iran. Saying that if they must, it is their duty to practice restraint and moderation, lest they put the Faith at risk or encourage the Baha´is there to leave. So it is clear that a Baha´i, on their own, would never in a million years travel to Iran and do anything that would be so

questionable. Unless they were doing so “under the auspices” of the institutions. To suggest otherwise is preposterous.

But for the moment you can count on the official Baha´i channels to be in full damage control mode. Not until things calm down, do I hope to know what the heck was going on behind the scenes.

If you know of any information regarding this (either proving or disproving the connection of the two events or anything else related), please let us know. The Baha´i world community derserves to know the truth.

I pray that all the Baha´is detained are treated well and released. And I also pray that the Baha´i world community really thinks this time when they go to the ballot box to choose the replacement for Semple and Martin.

Having said that, realistically, their replacements will probably come from the ITC´s XY chromosome pool.

The Restoration of the Shrine of the Bab

For some time now the Shrine of the Bab on Mount Carmel has been covered in scaffolding and a cover as it undergoes restoration. The work is extensive. The biggest and most visible component is replacing the golden tiles that served as the roof of the superstructure.

But much more is being done. Almost every facet of the building, facade and details are being restored. As well, structural engineer have buttressed the foundation and skeleton to make it earthquake proof.

It was not too long ago that the Archives building was completely restored. The facade of that building had eroded very badly due to the air pollution. Haifa, being an industrial and port city, has corrosive chemicals as well as salt from the sea. Make no mistake, Baha’is pay a very high price for the beautiful buildings and gardens on Mt. Carmel. And we can look forward to ongoing restoration as the expensive but soft marble gets damaged again and again.

The first shows the original building of the shrine with some of the prominent persons responsible for its design and construction:

The second slideshow features some pictures of the current restoration work:

Review – Live Free or Die Hard

It being summer and summer having the requisite American blockbuster movie… I was dragged to go see ‘Live Free or Die Hard’.

The movie doesn’t disappoint by living up to what you expect: cars are demolished, bullets fly, chase scences abound and the good guys always – somehow – win. If you turn your active brain off for about 2 hours it can even be fun.

With my last few synapses firing, I chuckled that while the movie was full of macho bravado, the movie played Credence Clearwater Revival’s “Fortunate Son” *twice*.

For those that aren’t familiar with the song or would like to hear it again, here it is with an introduction:

As the above video mentioned, the song was one of the most favourite anti-war songs in the 60′s. But I think most people enjoy it simply for its outstanding quality and not the message its lyrics contain. Fascinating how we come full circle after 30 years and find that the song has relevance today.

Here is Fogerty’s on the inspiration and process for the song:

> It’s a confrontation between me and Richard Nixon … The haves, the people who have it all. Not a positive image of the people who live up the hill, with their big cars. People I don’t respect. During the Vietnam War, these were the people who didn’t have to go to war. I was thinking about David Eisenhower, the grandson of Dwight, who married Julie Nixon. I always confused her with Tricia [Nixon]. I guess it’s easy to pick on somebody named Tricia. It sounds so silver spoon.

Anyway, I was showing the band the song. I didn't have much. I knew the chord changes and could feel the energy. I had a title, "Fortunate Son," but no song. Yet I was showing the band the structure, my normal gig as the musical director of the band.

So, I went into the bedroom, sat on the edge of my bed with a yellow legal tablet and my felt-tipped pen. Out came the song. "It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no fortunate son." I was screaming inside, very intense, but not saying a word. Out it came, onto three sheets of legal paper.

It took about twenty minutes. It was like vrooom — it just came right out.

I played that song at an antiwar protest. As I was walking in the hallway after our set, someone came up to me and told me what an awesome version we had played. I remember telling them, "Richard Nixon is a great inspiration."

Nixon was always saying 'peace with honor' and 'my country, love it or leave it,' but we knew better 'cause the guy was obviously evil.

Here are the lyrics:

Some folks are born made to wave the flag;
ooh, they're red, white and blue.
And when the band plays "Hail to the Chief,"
ooh, they point the cannon at you.

It ain't me, it ain't me;
I ain't no senator's son.
It ain't me, it ain't me;
I ain't no fortunate one.

Some folks are born silver spoon in hand,
Lord, don't they help themselves?
But when the taxman comes to the door,
Lord, the house looks like a rummage sale.

It ain't me, it ain't me;
I ain't no millionaire's son.

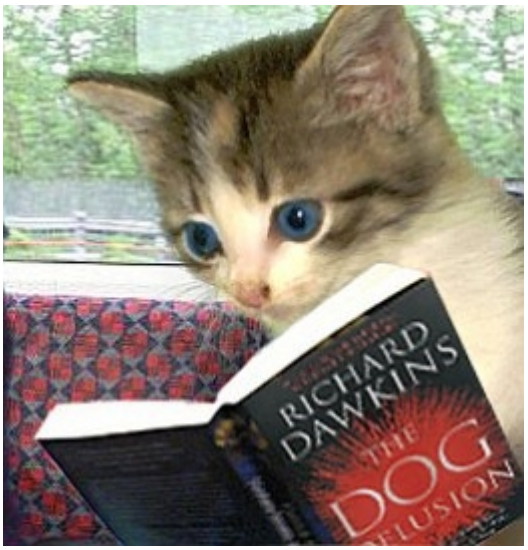
It ain’t me, it ain’t me;
I ain’t no fortunate one.

Some folks inherit star-spangled eyes;
ooh, they’ll send you down to war.
And when you ask ‘em, “How much should we give?”
ooh, they only answer, “More, more, more.”

It ain’t me, it ain’t me;
I ain’t no military son.
It ain’t me, it ain’t me;
I ain’t no fortunate one.

It ain’t me, it ain’t me;
I ain’t no fortunate one.
It ain’t me, it ain’t me;
I ain’t no fortunate son.

Richard Dawkins’ New Book



What I learned from reading the entire Bible

Rick Steves: A Perspective on Iran

While you can watch the video above (be patient for it to buffer), you can also watch the complete video here. Since it is long (over an hour including the question & answer portion at the end) from that link, you can jump through different sections at the bottom of the video.

For the most part he's far too easy on Iran. He white-washes the treatment of women, citing for example that a separate car in the subway is out of respect for women. He somehow manages to bypass the myriad abuses and infringements of women's rights in Iran. I don't know if this is because of sheer ignorance or because he is so adamant about trying to see things through another perspective.

To see what he says about the treatment of Baha'is, jump to chapter 13: Religious Freedom. His conclusion is, "if you're a Baha'i, get out of Iran".

Steves also concedes that there is no religious freedom but then says that the same 'tyranny of the majority' exists in the US. While the US or any western democratic country is not perfect, such a comparison is completely without merit. The whole world was witness just a few months ago to the rule of democracy and meritocracy in the US. Something which has been wholly annihilated in Iran – as can be seen by the Corruption Perception Index by Transparency International (Iran is #141 for 2008).

Something else which struck me is that he claims that Ahmadinejad came to power because of a populous dislike of the US (caused by the Bush administrations ill advised wars). This is incorrect. Ahmadinejad was brought to power by powerbrokers (Hojatieh Society) behind the scene that wanted an easily manipulated puppet that would implement their agenda to take the country further and further into fundamentalism.

The biggest mistake that Steves makes is to assume that Iran is in the mess that it is because a group of well-meaning, "family values" oriented folks are in charge. The truth is that Iran is controlled by a power hungry, kleptocrats that are using religion as a tool to enslave and manipulate.

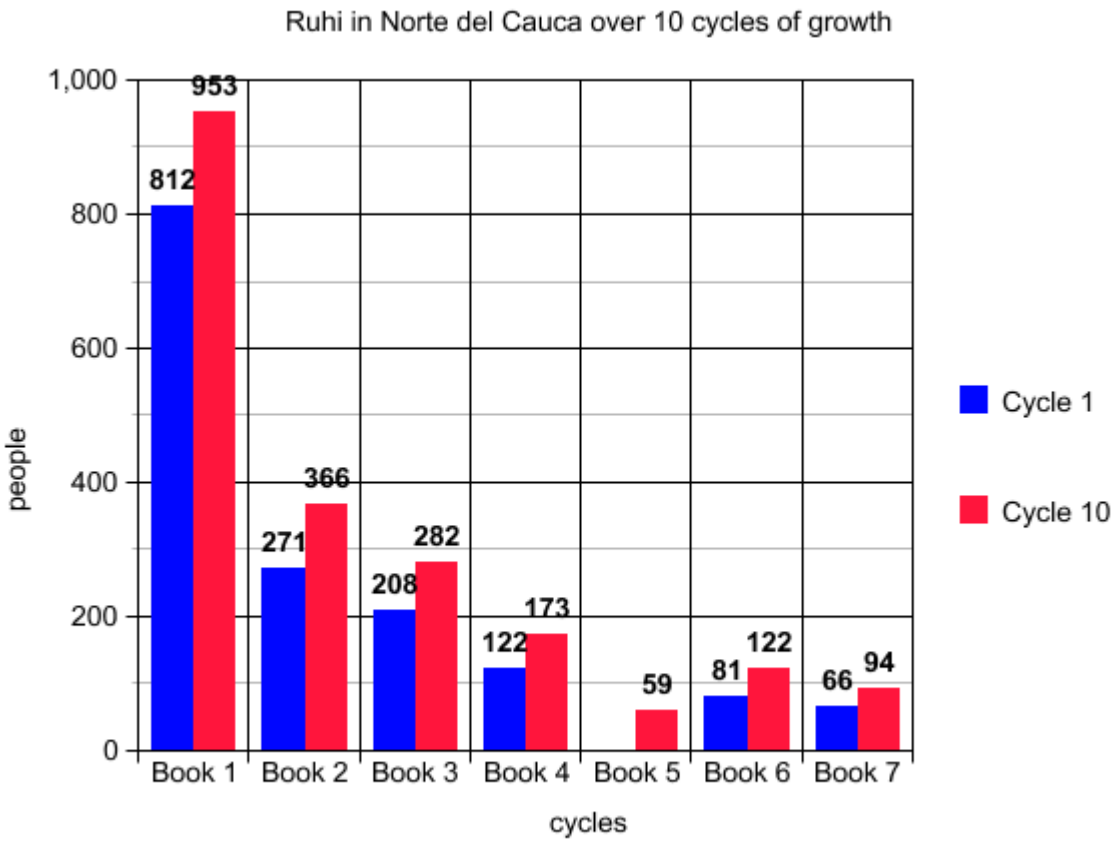
Ridvan Message 2012 from the Universal House of Justice

This year's Ridvan message from the Universal House of Justice is notable for the announcement of several building projects for local and national Houses of Worship. The House of Justice notes that as the process of entry by troops is advanced enough to merit the construction of a national Mashriqu'l-Adhkar in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in Papua New Guinea.

According to the House of Justice, the construction of the Temple in Chile and these new houses of worship mark the "Fifth Epoch of the Formative Age of the Faith".

As well, several local Houses of Worship will be built in select localities. These should be familiar to Baha'is if they have been keeping up with the news of international teaching successes. A document from 2008, "Attaining the dynamics growth: Glimpses from ?ve continents" prepared by the International Teaching Center outlined several of these localities.

Among them: Bihar Sharif in India which is a predominantly rural area with 1200 villages each with 1000 average population. Matunda Soy and Tiriki West clusters in Kenya were noted for their achievements in the 2008 Regional conference as part of the international Five Year conferences. A personal Baha'i blog from Tiriki West cluster offers a bit more detail. Another locality with this distinction is Norte del Cauca in Colombia which is the site of the original Ruhi courses.



Source: "Attaining the dynamics of growth", page 17.

Battambang in Cambodia was the site of a regional conference in 2009 with Baha'is participating from Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia. Finally Tanna in the Pacific island of Vanuatu will also be a site for a local house of worship.

The Ridvan message is below:

Roger White: Applesauce

Perhaps my favourite poem by Roger White, *poet laureate* of the Baha'i community:

APPLESAUCE

I tire, Eve, of innocence,
Let's kiss and grow contented.

Suppose we touched, where I protrude
And you're cunningly indented?

Oh Adam, what a sweet pastime!
I'm glad that I consented.
Tell me, dear, what shall we call
This game that we've invented?

With half my heart I'd call it *love*
And not have it repented;
The other half would name it sin
And urge it be prevented.

Had I not led you to the fruit
Guilt would be circumvented.
My punishment's to have my crime
Eternally resented.

Spake the snake:

All Adam's sons are cursed to woo
A maid and gently take her;
But after they've made applesauce
They'll like as not forsake her.
And down the centuries men proclaim:
We'll take the pleasure, she the blame.
Let posterity lament
That mother Eve gave her assent;
In slithering wisdom I rejoice
That she gave birth to slippery choice.

adam-and-eve-titian
Adam & Eve by Titian (Prado Museum)

> Roger White believed committed artists would be a vital force in preventing inflexibility in the Baha'is community. "They will," he predicted, addressing a group of Baha'is youth in Haifa in 1990, "be a source of rejuvenation. They

> will serve as a bulwark against fundamentalism, stagnation and administrative sterility…To the degree the Baha'is community views its artists as a gift rather than a problem will it witness the spread of the faith ‘like wildfire’ as promised by Shoghi Effendi, through their talents being harnessed to the dissemination of the spirit of the Cause.” To this end, White encouraged hundreds of budding writers and artists around the world, and called upon Baha'is communities to assist the artists to find their place.

Obituary

No related posts.

Roxana Saberi – Between Two Worlds

Roxana Saberi has written a book about her experience last year in Iran: Between Two Worlds. She was recently at the Daily Show with Jon Stewart to explain how she was arrested in Iran on trumped up charges of espionage.

In the short interview she mentions sharing a cell in Evin prison with two Baha’is. If you are in the US, you can watch the video (Canadians can see the clip here):

Saberi was also involved in the recently released film, No One Knows About Persian Cats. In the interview she struggles to try to explain why the Iranian authorities had detained her. This is a common mistake that is often made by outsiders who watch events in Iran.

Many times, if not almost always, things happen in Iran not because of an over-arching plan but because of a chaotic mix of conflicting interests. It is very difficult for those who live in a civilized and orderly society to understand this because we simply can not imagine a place like that.

But Iranian society is nothing more than a mish-mash of various groups and different layers of government, each with its own opaquely defined authority and sphere of influence. Not surprisingly they often are in conflict with each other and many innocent people are victimized amid this greater tumult.

Just to give you an idea of the various factions, you have the Mullahs, the Bazaris (merchant class), the Pasdaran, the Basiji, the police, the military, the Revolutionary Guards, various Intelligence forces, etc. Each one is stepping on various toes. For example, the Mullahs have billion dollar “foundations” or Bonyads. Using this as a facade they have muscled in on the economic activities which were once only the territory of the Bazaris.

So it is futile to seek out a logical rational for anything out of Iran. The whole place is a corrupt, benighted cesspool masquerading as a country.

No related posts.

Ruhi

I think its about time I let off some steam about the abomination plaguing the Baha´i community, known by its official name: Ruhi. Thanks to Marco who inspired me with his response to my previous entry on Baha´is and SED.Most defenders of the courses (its really more than just courses, for many communities it has become the end-all and the be-all) say that it is a good way for all Baha´is to have a common understanding of the Faith. How I wish this were so.

Unfortunately, Ruhi doesn´t really accomplish this because it is sadly deficient and downright incorrect. I don´t want to waste space here outlining the numerous errors and shortcomings of Ruhi. It has already been done elsewhere on the net, by fanatical defenders of the status quo, such as can be found on talk.relgion.bahai Even those who normally bend over backwards to accomodate the shortcomings of the the persons elected and appointed to work within the institutions, confess to Ruhi´s abismal content.

But if we leave aside the content of Ruhi, it is still one of the worst things that ever happened to the Baha´i international community because it has inculcated an introverted attitude within us. No longer are we interested in reaching out to the world and connecting with other people and groups with similar values. No longer are we interested in seeing how we can help those in need, or those less fortunate. No longer are we interested in truly deepening in the Writings through independent investigation of truth.

All of the above and more have been supplanted with the zombie-like Ruhi classes where navel gazing is the order of the day; where you park your brain at the door and pick it up when you leave (if you remember); where you memorize things and learn by repetition like a parrot rather than using your own imagination, intelligence and creativity; where whole communities become desperately and passionately preoccupied with how many of their members have done how many courses and filled out the blank spaces in books with the "correct" answers; where we hear such mind-numbing drivel such as What does our pyramid look like in our cluster? pass for wisdom (from the former ITC member, Paul Lample).

And long forgotten are Baha´u´llah and the Perfect Exemplar, Abdu´l-Baha and what they each have to teach us about how to live in this world.

As long as Baha?[illegible] communites continue to be preoccupied with Ruhi and its myriad forms and variations, they will encase themselves in a bubble of their own making. They will be living away from the real world, as well as the life giving waters of the Writings.

Now, if you are feeling rather brave today, contact your nearest Jehova´s Witness church and ask them sweetly if you can attend one of their Bible study classes. Pretty soon you´ll come running out of the class like a bat out of hell, screaming at the top of your lungs. And I dare say your view of Ruhi will be somewhat different.

And that, is what I think of Ruhi (without resorting to four letter words).

Related Links:

Ruhi Redux: More thoughts on Ruhi (less emotional, more informative).

Ruhi: Mistaking Correlation for Causation

I've been catching up on the Baha'i blogosphere this weekend and I just read Alison's thought provoking observations on Ruhi.

> The thinking behind this all-encompassing Ruhi project appears to me like a cargo-cult mentality. Boiled down, it says: “If we build it, they will come”. In the late 19th century, peoples in the Pacific Islands believed that if they built structures associated with cargo, this would lead to cargo magically turning up. Wiki says: “The most famous examples of Cargo Cult behavior have been the airstrips, airports, and radios made out of coconuts and straw. The cult members built them in the belief that the structures would attract transport aircraft full of cargo. Believers stage ‘drills’ and ‘marches’ with twigs for rifles and military-style insignia and ‘USA’ painted on their bodies to make them look like soldiers.” You see, the cult members had no idea how cargo was actually made and transported to their islands. Instead, they associated its appearance with the appearance of spiritual beings with magical equipment.

I chuckled a bit reading that because Alison is an excellent writer and it made me see in my mind’s eye little jungle men marching in faux-uniforms pretending to be air traffic controllers or soldiers and what-not.

The fallacy that induced the cargo-cults is mistaking correlation for causation. That is, because A happened and then B happened… A must have caused B. So if we repeat A, we should get result B.

Or in simpler terms, because ice cream sales go up when it is hot and sunny, lets sell more ice cream, because then we should have a warm, sunny day.

When you stop to think about it, that is pretty much what happened. Ruhi was a small tiny project being developed and run in a few small villages in Columbia. The target audience was mostly illiterate to moderately literate rural folk. The results were good (I still haven’t seen any proof of this but let’s let it slide for now). So the creators of Ruhi thought they’d hit the secret method to win over the world to the Baha’i Faith.

Yet after giving Ruhi the benefit of the doubt for more than 10 years, it can not withstand even the most superficial scientific inquiry. Was Ruhi really successful in Columbia? How do we know it and only it was the reason that (allegedly) rural Columbians became Baha'i? How do we know there wasn't another factor(s)? Has it been successful since? Has it been successful as an export? how and why?

The data offered from the Baha'i World Center is nil. Sure, there are anecdotal evidence: gloriously moving stories of 2 yak herders in downtown Gypjak taking Ruhi classes. But no hard data.

In fact, the only data we have comes from the national level. Like the recent one from the United States. And not only does it *not* provide any evidence of Ruhi's efficacy… it in fact suggests that since Ruhi was introduced about 10 years ago, the Baha'i community has seen an accelerated rate of decline in enrollments and an acceleration in the rise of people leaving the Faith. Furthermore, according to the NSA, the "A" clusters, those cities and areas which are the apogee of the Ruhi system are showing no difference in growth or enrollments than other clusters.

Think I'm making all this stuff up?

Read the annual report from the National Spritual Assembly of the United States for yourself! Investigate the truth independently my good wo/man.

So all the hard data we do have is showing that a cargo cult mentality is an apt analogy for Ruhi. Why not? They are both unscientific and about as effective at bringing about the desired result.

But while cargo-cults in Oceana are a sociological oddity we can giggle at, Ruhi is really damaging the Baha'i Faith. It will take us years to realize just how much damage was inflicted. But by that time it will be too late.

This is why I asked previously:

"How will we know, specifically, if this whole Ruhi/core curriculum/institutes process is succeeding? what metrics will we have to watch? what time frame will have to elapse? is there any point or event or situation in which we may potentially acknowledge that it didn't work? what would that be?"

But why waste time asking such silly questions? There's a march at 1500 hours and I still haven't finished polishing my bamboo rifle. So if you'll excuse me… hep-two, hep-two, hep-two….

Ruhi Redux

My previous commentary on the Ruhi course got a lot of feedback so I wanted to revisit the topic. Previously, I didn't really delve into any specifics. I hope to remedy that here.That Ruhi has become a controversial and polarizing topic within Baha'i communities is not in doubt. In fact, it has almost become a secret handshake of sorts that distinguishes free thinking Baha'is from others.Some have pointed out the similarity between Ruhi and its Chrisian kissing cousin, the Alpha course. I can't comment on a comparison in any significant way because I haven't taken the Alpha course. But I think it is totally conceivable that some cross pollination (to put it politely) took place when the Alpha course began to take off in the Christian world in the early 1990's. Its not hard to imagine that some in the Baha'i administration saw its success and took note. From what I read about the Alpha course, it seems much more flexible and customizable than Ruhi. It also seems much more open ended and intellectually stimulating. If anyone has taken both courses, please feel free to drop a comment below.

The first and most important point that must be made when talking about validity and quality of Ruhi is that it is based upon a foundation of implied assumptions. These are that a systematic and standardaized curriculum is best – or atleast, better. I can not overstate how important, yet silent, assumptions these are. I have never really seen anyone point

them out or to question them. Instead they are unblinkingly accepted. I do question these assumptions and wonder why such a fundamental element of Ruhi is never discussed. My take on this is that it isn't because it can not withstand intellectual scrutiny.

I have no doubt that Ruhi met with great success when it was first introduced in Columbia. Arbab created something which worked great teaching and consolidating poor and semi-literate Baha'is in the rural communities of Latin America. Unfortunately, with these initial successes, the man with a hammer began to see the whole world as a nail.

The whole essence of Ruhi is *taqlid* (blind and unquestioning imitation in action or belief). At the time of Baha'u'llah this was a big deal since much of Shi'ite doctrine (and the orthodox authority of the Mullah's and Mutjahid) rested on *taqlid*. Baha'u'llah instructs Baha'is to put it aside and instead use individual investigation of truth. We have anectodal evidence (where Baha'u'llah admonishes a student for parroting the teachers lesson and then rewards him when he comes to a personal understanding and puts the lesson in his own words) as well as explicit texts which condemn *taqlid*.

Another negative aspect of Ruhi is that it has a strong crowding out effect in every community that it is implemented. Each person and each community has a finite amount of time, energy, money, etc. And when we devote our resources in one direction, we are simultaneously denying them to any other area. Since the Baha'i community has been pushed into doing the sequence of Ruhi courses they have very little resources to devote elsewhere. Like the Mashriq'ul-Adhkar, charitable and SED projects, deepenings, teaching projects and the like. I've even seen some groups take it over and over again in a sort of crazy Groundhog Day scenario.

Putting aside all that, the strongest argument against Ruhi is its own content. It is a jumble of authenticated Baha'i texts (from the writings of the central Figures), pilgrims notes (which have dubious historical accuracy) and the commentary and interpretation of the editors and creators of the Ruhi courses themselves. What's more, no distinction is made between these differing sources. Also non-existent is any sort of context for the quotes. The student is expected to treat them all the same way, that is read, write in the questions, repeat, and memorize.

Yet, for all of its flaws, in a very short time Ruhi managed to become sacrosanct. The how and the whys of this are rather simple. It is the only such program mentioned repeatedly by

name by the House of Justice and the ITC in their official communiques. Actually it is not only mentioned by the highest Baha'i institutions, it is strongly recommended and aggressively promoted by them. The NSAs, LSAs and individual Baha'is in turn take these cues for what they are.

For these same reasons, any criticism of the weaknesses of Ruhi is interpreted as a direct criticism or attack on the House of Justice and the ITC. This has resulted in a situation where, as a Baha'i, you either get with the program or are branded as covenantally weak. The poisonous effects of this on the Baha'i world community are already apparent and will be even more pronounced with time.

For some other ideas on Ruhi, you can read this essay by Anthony Lee.

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From the Ruhi Course *To the Collaborators* (if you are unfamiliar with Ruhi vocabulary, this refers to any and all who participate in the Ruhi program, either as students or as teachers – er, sorry…tutors):

> "It is natural that a verse from the Writings should bring to mind myriads of noble and beautiful ideas. To share these ideas with the friends on appropriate occasions conduces to joy and happiness. But care must be exercised so that this practice does not become an exercise in the expression of ego and an insistence on the sovereignty of personal opinion."

Interesting. Especially when you consider the elevated station that the individual's conscience has in the Baha'i writings. Also interesting when you consider that individual investigation of truth is a major tenet of the Baha'i Faith. I also wonder what role ego has to play when the writers of Ruhi, without any distinction, comingle their own words and understanding with the sacred texts and impose on the students to study and memorize them in the same way.

> The experience of the Ruhi Institute has shown that we do not suppress the imagination or the personality of the participants when we refrain from posing questions such as, "What does this mean to you?"

Not only is this never shown by the Ruhi Institute to be the case, the anecdotal evidence contradicts it:

> This reminded me of an experience last summer: several Baha'is and guests were gathered for a monthly potluck social. A relatively new believer came into the drive, leapt from his car, stormed over to our group by the barbeque-obviously agitated. In a firm voice he said: "I will NOT be indoctrinated!" It took a bit of consoling to arrive at the source of his distress. As a new believer he had been encouraged to participate in a Ruhi Book I study circle. He explained that he was so insulted by the "shallowness" of the material that he couldn't take it any more and walked out…

Unfortunately, since the same group (Arbab, Correa, Lample, etc.) that created and promoted Ruhi are now in the highest positions within the Baha'i Administration, it will be long time until we put it all behind us. For this small group of persons, there is just too much personal interest at stake. I can empathize. Its never easy to admit that one is wrong. That's just human. But usually when we fall prey to this defect of human nature, it is only ourselves that we hurt. But in the case of Ruhi, the whole Baha'i community is suffering.

Related:

Check out Alison's post on *taqlid*.

Sault College Offers Ruhi Course

A community college in Ontario, Canada is offering the Ruhi course. Or at least the first book in the sequence:

> In this course you will develop an understanding of the Baha'i writings through three guided segments of the text, Reflections on the Life of the Spirit. Through class discussion and self-reflective exercises you will explore the

> following areas: Understanding the Baha'i Writings, Prayer, and Life and Death. The workbook, Reflections on the Life of the Spirit, Ruhi Institute can be purchased from the Campus Shop.

Unless I'm mistaken, this is the first time a Ruhi course has been offered by a non-Baha'i educational institution.

EDIT: I'm told by Steve M in the comments below that this isn't the first instance at all.

This is great news! Now perhaps we can have non-Baha'is take Ruhi while we get on with actually doing something, *you know*, useful.

What do you think?

Second Fastest Growing Religion

Currently there is an interesting discussion on Talisman about the nature and evolution of the Baha'i community and identity. Among the things being talked about is the size of the Baha'i community in the US.

Apparently, according to the numbers from the NSA of the United States, we are seeing a stagnant community. And if taken relative to the growing population of the host country, one that is slowly becoming smaller.

But to my surprise, according to the World Christian Database, at the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, the Baha'i Faith is the second fastest growing religion in the world:

Moshe Milner/GPO/Newsmakers

The Bahai Faith*

Growth rate: 1.70 percent

Adherents: 7.7 million

Behind the trend: High birthrates in India

Areas to watch: Bahais are spread throughout the world, but a good chunk—around 1.8 million—live in India. The Bahai faith was founded in 1863 in Iran by Bahá'u'lláh, who claimed to be the latest in a line of prophets stretching from Abraham to Jesus Christ to Mohammed. The world headquarters of the Bahai faith are in Haifa, Israel. Today, Bahais often suffer persecution elsewhere in the Middle East, especially in Iran.

The methodology isn't clear but it seems that they are citing the Baha'i communities in the developing world, especially India for that achievement.

This is a contentious issue because Indians have very malleable religious identities. Many are Baha'is as well as their original faith tradition (whatever it may be among the thousands available in India).

As well, according to the 1991 government census, the Indian Baha'i community numbers approximately 5,500 believers – that is people who identified themselves as such – instead of 1.8 million as cited in the article.

Of course, it is possible that in the interim years the community grew, but from 5,000 to 1.8 million? Either the census is inaccurate or the current numbers are (or both).

One thing which I don't quite understand is this, if we assume the 1.8 million number to be correct then the Indian Baha'i community comprises a huge portion of the total. According to the World Christian Database, almost 25%!

So where are they? where is their influence? where and how are they represented in the worldwide community?

As I look across the membership of the International Teaching Center, the Universal House of Justice, the Counsellors, etc… I don't see a proportional representation of Indian Baha'is.

And if you think this post is another April Fool's prank, well, there's no hope for you 😉

Second Language Improves Cognition

In his seminal work, “God Passes By” Shoghi Effendi summarized the Baha’i Faith into approximately a dozen principles which are “the essential elements of that Divine polity”. Among these is “the adoption of a universal auxiliary language”.

This idea was proposed by Baha’u’llah as a practical method to increase unity in a linguistically fragmented world. In the *Tablet of Ishraqat* (Splendours) Baha’u’llah writes:

> The sixth Ishr??q is union and concord amongst the children of men. From the beginning of time the light of unity hath shed its divine radiance upon the world, and the greatest means for the promotion of that unity is for the peoples of the world to understand one another’s writing and speech. In former Epistles We have enjoined upon the Trustees of the House of Justice either to choose one language from among those now existing or to adopt a new one, and in like manner to select a common script, both of which should be taught in all the

> schools of the world. Thus will the earth be regarded as one country and one home. The most glorious fruit of the tree of knowledge is this exalted word: Of one tree are all ye the fruit, and of one bough the leaves. Let not man glory in this that he loveth his country, let him rather glory in this that he loveth his kind. Concerning this We have previously revealed that which is the means of the reconstruction of the world and the unity of nations. Blessed are they that attain thereunto. Blessed are they that act accordingly.

And in the *Tablet of Maqsud*:

> Among the things which are conducive to unity and concord and will cause the whole earth to be regarded as one country is that the divers languages be reduced to one language and in like manner the scripts used in the world be confined to a single script. It is incumbent upon all nations to appoint some men of understanding and erudition to convene a gathering and through joint consultation choose one language from among the varied existing languages, or create a new one, to be taught to the children in all the schools of the world.

But language is not merely a passive tool for communication. No, it is much more complex than that because it in return shapes our manner of thinking. It is difficult to realize this if one only knows one language, just as it is impossible for a goldfish to contemplate existing outside of its watery home.

We know, for example, that children benefit greatly from speaking more than one language. Even more remarkable the benefits of multiple language competence has been show to retard cognitive diseases such as dementia.

And a recent study shows that those who speak two languages have better critical thinking and decision making skills ("The Foreign-Language Effect: Thinking in a Foreign Tongue Reduces Decision Biases"). The authors write:

> Using a foreign language reduces decision-making biases. Four experiments show that the framing effect disappears when choices are presented in a foreign tongue. Whereas people were risk averse for gains and risk seeking for losses when choices were presented in their native tongue, they were not influenced by this framing manipulation in a foreign language.

> Two additional experiments show that using a foreign language reduces loss aversion, increasing the acceptance of both hypothetical and real bets with positive expected value. We propose that these effects arise because a foreign language provides greater cognitive and emotional distance than a native tongue does.

We all recognize that there are two modes in which we think: conscious, analytical and rational and the other, subconscious, fast, emotional. Or "right brain" vs. "left brain". It appears that simply by 'thinking' in a different language people are less prone to making emotionally charged decisions based on fear and more likely to accurately weigh the options and make rational analytical choices.

Getting back to the issue of an auxiliary language, the Baha'i Faith has not taken any steps towards issuing a decision or lobbying for any specific language. But other groups are active in this discussion. Among the first was the "Delegation for the Adoption of an International Auxiliary Language" who in 1901 decided to choose Esperanto with a few modifications (known as "Ido"). That decision yielded no real results because the group did not have any political or social clout.

The discussion on a world auxiliary language has continued off and on since then, mostly within academic circles. Because of the gargantuan effort needed to mandate an official international auxiliary language, we may never have such an artificially imposed decision. Instead we may see a naturally evolving acceptance of one candidate as it becomes the dominant language. English would seem to be an organic candidate because of its adoption as the official language of aviation, maritime travel, and other major fields.

While the selection process is ongoing this is a beautiful example of yet another Baha'i principle: the harmony of science and religion.

Image credit: Megan Eaves (flickr)

Rainn Wilson Audition Tapes

Lets kick off the weekend with these hilarious Rainn Wilson audition "out-takes"…

***Juno* – for the role of Juno MacGuff:**

***Juno* – for the role of Paulie Bleeker:**

***Le Scaphandre et le papillon* (The Diving Bell & The Butterfly) – for the role of Jean-Dominique Bauby:**

***I'm Not There* – for the role of Bob Dylan:**

Sectarian Violence: Explosion in Shiraz Mosque

A home-made bomb exploded, killing at least 9 people, and injuring more than a 100 in Shiraz today. The site of the bombing was the Shohada (Martyrs) mosque, part of the Rahpouyan-e-Vesal cultural center.

My condolences and prayers to those who lost loved ones and for those who were injured.

No one has yet officially claimed responsibility but since the mosque is well known for its Saturday sermons against the Baha'i Faith and Wahabi Muslims, it is suspected that it is sectarian violence.

I have not read in any reports that the Baha'i community is even suspected of carrying out such an atrocity. Instead most reports cite a group of militant Sunni muslims who have carried out similar attacks.The Wahabis, a branch of Sunni Islam, view the Shi'ites as heretics.

The last instance of similar violence was in February 2007 when a bus carrying a group of Revolutionary Guards exploded, killing 11 and wounding 30 more.

It is not rare to hear sermons in Iran against the Baha'i Faith. Uniting the people against a common enemy, even if it happens to be a phantom one, and distracting them from real issues has been a very effective ploy used by the ruling clergy class.

I hope that the Baha'i community in Iran isn't made to be the scapegoat of this tragedy and there are no repercussions to them. God knows they are already under enough persecution.

Looking on the bright side of things, if there can ever be one, is that news reports of this event highlight the Baha'i Faith and the plight of the Iranian community:

> The Bahai faith was founded in the 1860s by a Persian nobleman, Baha'u'llah, who claimed to be a new prophet in the series that included Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Islam considers Muhammad to be the last of the prophets.
>
> Iran had been the cradle of the Bahai faith in the middle of the 19th century. After the 1979 Islamic revolution, the faith was banned and it is not recognized in the Iranian constitution as a religious minority.
>
> Last year, Bahai communities abroad reported that a group of followers were detained in Shiraz while helping poor communities there.

Sentinel Project Monitors Safety of the Baha'is of Iran

The international tension between Iran and Western countries has ratcheted up to an alarming level. Although both sides are full of bluster, everyone is hoping that the P5+1 meeting to take place in Turkey on April 14th will provide an alternative to war.

The Islamic regime in Iran may shock everyone and ameliorate its stance on its 'right to nuclear energy'. But even if it does, it will be for only one reason: self-preservation. For

that same reason Iran is not letting up any pressure on human rights or freedoms of expression within its borders.

The recent UN special rapporteur's report outlines just how bad the situation is in Iran and how it is worsening every year; not just for Baha'is but for anyone who falls foul of the Islamic regime.

In a few months access to the internet will be severely curtailed as Iran rolls out a "clean internet" which will be devoid of gmail, google, hotmail, twitter, etc. to be replaced with *Iran Mail* and "Iran Search Engine". Iranians must register with their full legal name, address and national ID in order to use it. The next step will be a fully self-contained national intranet scheduled to go live in August 2012.

As human rights abuses perpetrated on the Iranian Baha'is continue, the 7 members of the Yaran (the alternative to an NSA which operated as the administrative body for the Baha'is of Iran) have been incarcerated for 10,000 days. The news of their arrest was broken first on Baha'i Rants in 2008: Baha'i Administrative Body of Iran Arrested.

This tragic milestone has lead to a redoubled effort by Baha'is to advocate on their behalf. A recent Op-Ed by Dr. Kishan Manoucha on the Wall Street Journal is one example of this.

Another is the Sentinel Project, a non-profit NGO based in Canada with the aim of providing an early warning system to prevent genocide around the world. Right now there are two situations of concern that they are monitoring, the Baha'is of Iran and Kenya.

The Sentinel Project monitors several important variables such as "symbolization", "dehumanization", "preparation" and "polarization". They base these reports on available information, including the work of Sen McGlinn in reporting and translating Iranian reports.

The Sentinel Project has released several reports about its work on behalf of the Baha'is of Iran, including "Threat of Genocide to the Baha'iss of Iran" and a Supplementary Report.

The reports by the Sentinel Project mention several important variables including the Hojjatieh Society which I wrote about in 2005.

While the efforts of NGOs like the Sentinel Project are laudable and all decent persons everywhere wish to see a free and democratic Iran which upholds human rights, the

Baha'is that are able to leave Iran and remove themselves from harm should continue to do so (Farewell to Iran). It is my sincere wish that the UHJ acts as it did in the previous intensification of persecution of Baha'is in Iran and actively encourage and support the emigration of Baha'is from Iran for their safety.

Significance of the Financial Crisis for Iran

How will the recent financial banking crisis effect Iran? what, if any, significance does it hold for the Baha'is of Iran? To answer that we first have to look at the economy of the country.

The Iranian economy is primarily based on its fossil fuels. According to the Iranian Central Bank, oil and gas exports accounted for $82 billion in the first quarter of this year. Non energy related exports accounted for only $15.6 billion which comes from mostly pistachios and woven carpets. The energy revenue is about to shrink considerably as oil prices have fallen in international markets from $147 a barrel to $65 a barrel.

A perfect storm is headed towards this teetering economy. Not only will a lower crude oil and natural gas price mean lower revenues for the IRI but a retrenching world economy will mean that Iran's already thinly stretched trade relationship with the outside world will be strained even more, leaving the economy even more precariously dependent on diminishing petrodollars. As well, the lack of refining capacity

means that Iran will have to continue to pay for refined fuel to be imported from Turkey at relatively stable prices. This will further squeeze the economy as their own raw material expenses will be relatively unchanged. Iranians have lived with extremely cheap fuel for their whole lives, paying 3-4 cents a liter. If the government tries to end the subsidies and pass on the real expense of the fuel, there will be an overnight riot engulfing the whole country.

Just this past month, the IRI was impotent to implement a 3% VAT on retail sales. It was first delayed when it met initial resistance but when the delay's deadline wore out, shopkeepers closed their stores in droves across Iran. The government has also had to back down on its demands for more transparent accounting to get more tax revenues. And a plea for businesses to pay back outstanding and delinquent debts has gone unanswered. Iran's tax revenues only make up a fifth of the countries budget, so as you can imagine, not very many pay their share of taxes and don't like to be forced to all of a sudden.

The gigantic oil surplus funds that Iran had amassed has now been totally spent by Ahmadinejad in his desperate attempt to curry favor with those who elected him into power on a platform of "putting oil wealth on the dining room table". All that this spending spree has accomplished is runaway inflation – by some estimates topping 30%. Food prices alone are running at 40%. Iran's Central Bank recently acknowledged that almost 25% of the Iranian population live in poverty.

Ahmadinejad will seek another term in office in June 2009 which could coincide with a full blown economic tsunami. If the price of oil and gas continue to go down or simply remain in this range, the economy of Iran will suffer greatly as the government has created budgets based on much higher estimates of oil revenue. Some economists estimate that Iran needs a minimum of $75-80 a barrel to remain standing. As Iran comes under more stress due to lower oil prices, their credit rating and currency strength will also suffer, making imports more expensive. Further damaging the economy.

Ahmadinejad and the Hojjatieh extremists in power are in even more desperate need of petrodollars since that is how they have been able to prop up a diseased economy until now. They have had billions to distribute among the people to buy supporters. But today not only is inflation running wild, fraud and corruption continue to take their toll on Iran's economy to an unprecedented degree. There is no direct investment of any significance

from external sources which leaves the economy without any hope of capital injections. As well, with the recent moves against them, the *baazaris* who make the bulk of the Hojjatieh Society, are angry at Ahmadinejad.

In ancient Greece, less able sculptors would fill in the cracks of their marble statues with wax, making the imperfections less noticeable. Those that didn't would advertise their wares as *sin cere* or "without wax". The word today is known as sincere – as in truthful, honest, factual. If Ahmadinejad can not depend on the surplus oil revenue that Iran has been lucky to receive for the past few years, he will have less and less "wax" with which to gloss over the many ugly imperfections of Iran's crumbling facade.

When petrodollars can not sustain this, Iran's economy will hit a tipping point from which there is no return. Thanks to the mismanagement, cronyism, kleptocracy that has been characteristic of the Islamic regime, Iran's economy is in tatters and does not need much more than a "flick" to hit the tipping point.

It all comes down to one number which you can watch in your daily newspaper. If the price of oil and gas goes down, Iran will change. The other variable is how fast prices come down. Even if prices don't fall to extremely low levels, a dramatic decline, like the one we've seen so far can be a "shock". This is because the harder prices fall, the less time the country has to adjust and therefore, the more fatal the shock to the system. If we imagine oil falling according to the trajectory it has set since its high at $147, then we could potentially see $30 by the beginning of next year. Such an outcome would mean that the Iranian regime would not be able to survive in its current form.

No one knows what will happen but under such a scenario the priorities of people is not ideology but simply survival under Maslow's hierarchy of needs. And if such a scenario does unfold, it will mean a tremendous suffering for all Iranians. Which is why I continue to beg me fellow Baha'is to leave the hell-hole that is Iran. Things are bad now but they could get unbelievably worse. Under such a scenario, the IRI would completely shut out of their normal control mechanisms and the population would be in "everyone for themselves" mode.

If you've been reading my previous thoughts, this is nothing new:

> It is my humble opinion that if any political or religious change is in the offing it will come as a result of severe economic pressure which itself can only be

> brought on by a much lower crude price.
> My personal observation and analysis regarding this commodity leads me to conclude that it will be either much higher or pretty much at this level in the future, which is why most of my investments for the past 3 years have been related to oil/gas (don't confuse this with financial advice).
> *Iran's Future*
>
> As I've repeatedly said, no structural change will occur in Iran with the price of oil where it is because it gives the ruling kleptocracts too much leeway to fill in the gaps of a corrupt and decaying regime with petrodollars. After all, the cash that was given to hordes of Basijis (the fanatical militia controlled by Khamenei) to bully voters into supporting a dark horse candidate, has to come from somewhere.
> *Sundry*

The only thing that has changed in my view is that oil is now headed down for a while. OPEC has responded as they usually do, with talk of a restriction in supply. No one believes that they will actually do as they say because they desperately need the income.

A corollary to all this economic talk is that it could have real consequences for the Baha'i community in Iran. Not only as citizens of a decaying regime but also as member of a persecuted religious community. History has shown a pattern where economic turmoil seems to coincide with religious persecution. This has already been studied and analyzed as mentioned in this previous post about Iran.

If you are a Baha'i in Iran, for this and many other reasons, it is time to say Farewell to Iran. As a Baha'i we do not believe in patriotic propaganda, nationalism nor do we exalt or glory in one country over another. We are to glory in being part of humanity. So go be a part of a healthy, open, welcoming society. There are many out there that would be more than happy to have you as a productive member.

Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast

manufacturing-belief.png

In Lewis Carroll's "Through the Looking Glass," Alice tells the White Queen that she cannot believe in impossible things. But the Queen says Alice simply hasn't had enough practice. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast." That human penchant for belief — or perhaps gullibility — is what inspired biologist Lewis Wolpert to write a book about the evolutionary origins of belief called "Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast."

Wolpert is an eminent developmental biologist at University College London. Like fellow British scientist Richard Dawkins, he's an outspoken atheist with a knack for saying outrageous things. Unlike Dawkins, Wolpert has no desire to abolish religion. In fact, he thinks religious belief can provide great comfort and points to medical studies showing that the faithful tend to suffer less stress and anxiety than nonbelievers. In Wolpert's view, religion has given believers an evolutionary advantage, even though it's based on a grand illusion.

He has a theory for why religion first took root. He thinks human brains evolved to become "belief engines." Once our ancient ancestors understood cause and effect, they figured out how to manipulate the natural world. In essence, toolmaking made us human. Similarly, early hominids felt compelled to find causes for life's great mysteries, including illness and death. They came to believe in unseen gods and spirits.

Wolpert sees human incredulity all around him — not just religious faith but all sorts of modern superstitions. His book targets astrology, psychics, homeopathy and acupuncture. Wolpert has participated in public debates with maverick scientist Rupert Sheldrake about telepathy and other paranormal experiences. He dismisses Sheldrake's theory — that "morphic fields" can transmit thoughts through space and time — as nonsense.

There's no doubt that Wolpert is a provocateur, but unlike some other prominent atheists, he doesn't come across as a bitter enemy of religion. In conversation, his pronouncements are often punctuated by laughter and mock horror. I spoke with Wolpert by phone about the origins of religion, his doubts about telepathy and acupuncture, and why the debate over religion is so personal for him.

Can you explain the "belief engine" in the human brain?

What makes us different from all other animals is that we have causal beliefs about the physical world. I know that if I throw this glass at the window, it's probably going to break.

Children have this understanding at a very early age. Animals, on the other hand, have a very poor understanding of cause and effect in the physical world. My argument is that causal understanding gave rise to toolmaking; that was the evolutionary advantage. It's toolmaking that's really driven human evolution. This is not widely accepted, I'm afraid, but there's no question about it. It's tools that really made us human. They may even have given rise to language.

But there is evidence that some animals have a very primitive form of toolmaking.

There's no question that certain apes are at the edge of causal understanding and they do make some very simple tools. Chimpanzees can break a nut with a stone. They can also take a stick and peel it to get ants out of a tree. But it's still very primitive. Curiously, some crows show remarkable toolmaking, using sticks to get things out of bottles. But on the whole, it's primitive compared to us.

And I suppose the radically new thing our ancestors did was to put two objects together — for instance, a piece of stone on a wooden handle.

Precisely. You can't do that without having a concept of cause and effect. And once you had that concept, you wanted to understand the causes of other things that mattered in your life, like illness. That's the origin of religion. The most obvious causes were those things caused by humans, so people imagined there was some sort of god with human characteristics. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of different gods in different societies.

So once you have an understanding of cause and effect, then ignorance is no longer tolerable? You want to explain everything.

Exactly. You know, we cannot tolerate not knowing the causes of things that affect our lives. If you go to the doctor when you're ill, the one thing you can't stand is the doctor saying he or she has no idea what's wrong with you. And when they do diagnose you, I'm prepared to bet that on your way home, you'll tell yourself a story as to why you got ill.

But which came first: understanding cause and effect or learning to make tools?

They went together, but you cannot make complex tools without a concept of cause and effect. You must remember that no animal has a basket. If they go away from water, they

can’t take any water with them. They can’t carry things. However, we’re driven by interacting with our environment and looking for causes that affect our lives.

Are you saying our brains are hard-wired for belief?

Our brains are absolutely hard-wired for causal belief. And I think they’re a bit soft-wired for religious and mystical belief. Those people who had religious beliefs did better than those who did not, and they were selected for.

Why did they do better?

They were less anxious. They also had someone to pray to. In general, religious people are somewhat healthier than people who don’t have religious beliefs.

Haven’t studies shown that religious believers tend to be more optimistic, and that they’re less prone to strokes and high blood pressure?

Yes, exactly. Therefore, evolution will select them.

So religion gives us a sense of purpose and meaning, even though in your view it’s totally an illusion.

Yes, many people would find it very hard to live without religion. But there is no meaning, I regret to tell you. [Laughs] We don’t understand where the universe came from. But to say God made it, well, you want to say, who made God?

To say there’s no meaning is a pretty depressing assessment, isn’t it?

No, why should there be a meaning? I mean, we want a cause as to why we’re here, but I’m afraid there isn’t one. I don’t find it depressing at all. I think it’s remarkable that evolution has brought us into being. We’re only here for one purpose, from an evolutionary point of view, and that’s to reproduce.

You write that you were once quite a religious child yourself. When did you turn away from religion?

I came from quite a conventional Jewish family — not Orthodox, but conventional — in South Africa. I had to say my prayers every night. And I used to pray to God to help me in various things but found it didn’t help. So I stopped being religious.

Your son became a fundamentalist Christian after a difficult late adolescence. Is he still an evangelical Christian?

No, he's not. The church he was in broke up. He's still a believer, but he doesn't go to church.

Does his faith bother you?

No. I found that religion was helping him a great deal. It gave him someone to pray to. He became a member of a church where they could discuss their problems. And I think the idea that he would eventually go to heaven gave him a great deal of encouragement.

Has your son read the chapter on religion in your book? It's rather dismissive of religion.

He knows I'm dismissive of it. In fact, I just spoke to him last night on the telephone and asked him, "Did I ever try to dissuade you from being religious?" He said, "No, you never did." I wouldn't agree with him, but I never tried to dissuade him not to be.

Do you find yourself wondering about ultimate meaning? Does that matter in your life?

Never. Ultimate meaning has no meaning in my life. I sound a bit shallow, but I think it's actually quite deep not to be bothered by that sort of thing.

You call David Hume your "hero philosopher." Why do you like him so much?

First of all, I don't like any other philosopher. I think philosophers are terribly clever but have absolutely nothing useful to say whatsoever. I avoid philosophy like mad. But David Hume does say such interesting and important things. He's very good on religion, for example. I like him for that.

Well, he didn't like religion.

No, it's not that he didn't like religion. If you take miracles, for example, there's a lovely quote from David Hume that you shouldn't believe in any miracle unless the evidence is so strong that it would be miraculous not to believe in it.

There are various competing theories about the origins of religion. One is the idea that religion evolved because it helped bind people together in social groups. Essentially, it acted like social glue. Why don't you think that's right?

I don't think it's wrong. There is some evidence that religion does lead to a community with shared views. But you have to ask, Why does religion deal so much with cause and effect? That comes from causal beliefs.

What about Daniel Dennett's idea that religion is a kind of "meme" — an idea that has infected human cultures and keeps on spreading?

If you could tell me what a meme is, and how useful it is, I'd be very grateful. [Laughs] Please don't misunderstand, I'm a great admirer of Richard Dawkins [who developed the concept of memes]. But what are memes? How do you decide whether something is a meme or not? And what you really want to understand is, how is it passed on and why does it persist? This is never discussed. So for Daniel Dennett — who's a philosopher, after all — to get involved with memes, the moment he does that, I just stop reading him.

Virtually all these theories draw on evolutionary psychology. But I wonder if we're losing the flavor of religious experience, the willingness to live in mystery, embrace imagination and intuition.

Sometimes I've thought it must be quite nice to believe in religion. I'm getting quite old. The idea that I might go to heaven — of course, there's also the possibility, in my case, that I would go to hell — is quite an attractive one. Unfortunately, I don't believe that for a single second. I mean, the evidence for God is simply nonexistent.

Isn't there more to religion than belief in supernatural beings?

Certainly not.

But many theologians and scholars, such as historian Karen Armstrong, say religion at its root is not really about a set of beliefs. It's more about how to live your life and being compassionate in the world.

Well, many people who are atheists can behave quite well. That doesn't make us religious. No, it doesn't work like that at all.

I grant that. But do you really think religion comes down to belief in the supernatural?

When I talk about religion, I'm talking about belief in the supernatural. In Western society, we're talking about God. I don't believe you can be religious without having some concept of a god.

What about William James? He talked about religion as experience more than belief.

I think "The Varieties of Religious Experience" is one of the best books written about belief. Nothing has really changed since he wrote it a hundred years ago. He did point out that many people become religious because they had a religious experience. And that fits with my idea that we're partly wired to have religious beliefs. If you take the active component of a magic mushroom and give it to a group of people, quite a few of them will have mystical, almost religious, beliefs. It must mean the circuits are there which are turned on by the drug.

So it all comes down to the chemicals that are firing in the brain?

I'm afraid so. Your neural circuits, yes.

What about paranormal experiences like telepathy or life after death? Are those bogus?

Yes. All bogus. I have a very close friend, an artist, who claims to have seen three ghosts. She knew they were ghosts because they didn't have legs, and they told her things about the house she was staying in that she didn't know before. Yes, she had strange experiences. It doesn't mean they were ghosts. And I don't believe telepathy. Rupert Sheldrake, who's an old friend of mine, is a strong promoter of telepathy and things like that. I'm afraid the evidence just isn't there.

Rupert Sheldrake is a biochemist who used to teach at the University of Cambridge.

Oh, he was a very clever plant cell biologist.

He's done various controlled experiments trying to figure out whether people know who's going to phone them, or whether dogs know when their owners are coming home. You're saying none of that is legitimate science?

It's legitimate, but I'm unimpressed by all of it.

Let's talk about one of his experiments. He did a controlled study of what he calls "telephone telepathy." People were asked to give four phone numbers of friends. The callers were chosen randomly and then asked to guess who was calling. The statistical probability was that 25 percent of the guesses would be right. Sheldrake said the responses were more like 45 percent.

I'd like to see someone else do the experiment and have it confirmed. Remember what David Hume said? In order to believe in miraculous things, the evidence should be so miraculous that you could not but believe it. You can't just do one experiment like that on such an extraordinary thing like telepathy. Telepathy goes against everything we know about neurophysiology and physics. If telepathy exists, it would be a miracle. That's why I go back to Hume. The evidence has to be overwhelming.

Listen, almost everybody has a strange, non-normal experience once a year. Many, many people have these. If you take the right drugs, you can have them on order. People taking LSD had the most extraordinary experiences. Those experiences were real, but they had nothing to do with the real world.

Well, telepathy goes against the understanding that the mind is totally the product of the neural processes within the brain, which is certainly the dominant thinking among neuroscientists.

You also have to transmit that message over distances into somebody else's mind. That's just nonsense.

What if there are forces out there — perhaps energy fields, as Sheldrake would say — that we just haven't discovered yet?

[Laughs] OK, when he discovers them, he'll let us know. I'm saying you really have to have good evidence. And there isn't any.

When my grandfather was 16 years old, he heard an odd sound, looked up and saw the photograph of his grandfather knocking on the wall in the living room. This was so unusual that he checked the time it happened. Later that day, his family got a

telegram saying that his grandfather had died at precisely that time. Is that just coincidence?

Well, that is remarkable and I don't have an explanation. I'm afraid it probably is coincidence. But it does sound as if it's some sort of telepathic experience. And we all have that. You're thinking of someone and suddenly they phone you. You haven't spoken to them for six months and suddenly the phone rings and there they are. OK, I don't have a good explanation for that. But to think that there's some message going across is just most unlikely.

Unlikely yes, but doesn't this get at the limits of science?

No, it's not the limits of science. You've got to find experiments that will really show it. Science can't rely on anecdotes, on single, one-off experiences like this. You've got to find some way of testing them. Maybe the way Rupert Sheldrake goes about it is the right way to do it. But it has to be done extremely carefully, and single anecdotes tell you nothing.

You have written about alternative medicine and are highly skeptical of various healing practices, including energy healing and even acupuncture, which is now used quite widely in the West.

Yes, I know it's used. It's quite tricky because the placebo effect can really confuse these results very significantly. So if you believe the treatment is going to work, you've got a much higher chance that it's going to work. But there's just no evidence for the idea of energy fields, which acupuncturists use for deciding where to put the needles.

But there are thousands of years of experiential evidence going back to ancient China.

But nothing to do with energy. Energy is a well-defined concept. And I'm terribly sorry, no physiologist has ever detected any of these energy fields.

Maybe the scientific instruments that we have at our disposal just can't detect anything about qi.

Sorry. When they invented qi, how in the hell did they know what an energy field was? They hardly had a concept of energy. I mean, if you go back and look at their evidence, I'm afraid it was a nice set of ideas, but I'm terribly sorry, evidence matters. And that's what

causal beliefs are really about. If we believe that something has a particular cause, we should be looking for the evidence.

Many people say they've been helped by acupuncture. Are you saying the placebo effect is the only explanation?

I have no idea why it works. But it's extremely unlikely that it's got anything to do with those energy fields. It could be largely due to the placebo effect. And homeopathy, where there are no molecules in the liquid that you take, is even more bizarre. And many people believe in homeopathic medicine.

Do you have any superstitions yourself?

[Laughs] I touch wood occasionally, I'm ashamed to say. And I don't ever like to say that I'm really happy because I think the gods may not like it.

Are you joking? Or is there some little part of you that really believes this?

I suppose this is part of the soft-wiring for mysticism. There's a lovely story — I've forgotten the physicist — who had a horseshoe over his door. He said it didn't do him any harm, but might do him some good.

Pascal's wager, right? You decide you're better off believing in God, even though the existence of God seems unlikely.

[Laughs] No, I don't go as far as that, but I am a little superstitious, yes. A tiny bit.

If you look into your crystal ball, do you think we will always have religion? Or will reason win out at some point?

I believe we will always have religion. Churchgoing has declined in England, but the number of people who believe in God is still quite high. And in America, it's very high. And you just have to look at the Muslim world. It's very strong there. I'd be very surprised if it disappeared.

So the project of Richard Dawkins — basically, to try to turn us all into atheists — is just a pipe dream?

I believe it to be a pipe dream. The idea that you could persuade people not to be religious is in my view a hopeless aim. It comes from people's personal experience, rather than logical arguments.

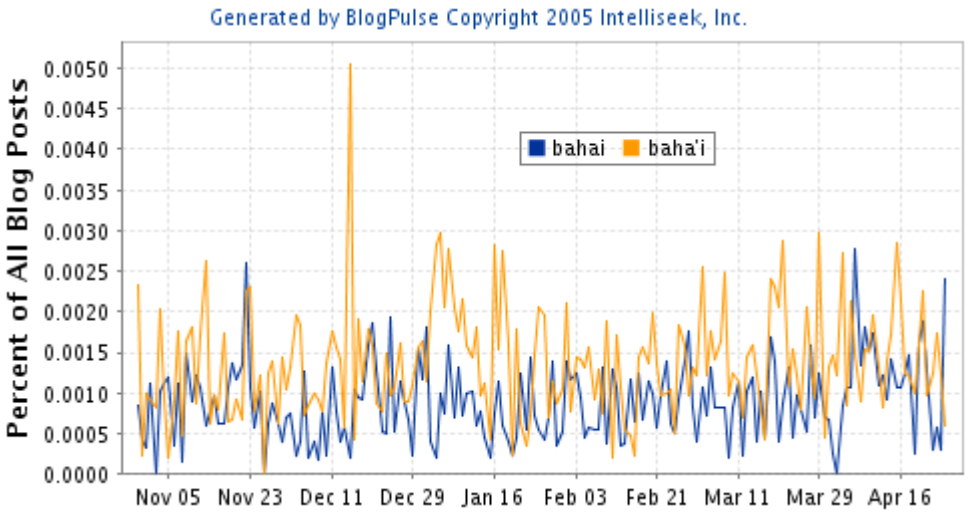
But isn't this what you're doing in your book, arguing for the virtues of reason over religious belief?

Not at all. I'm trying to understand what determines religious belief. I'm not trying to convert people out of religion. Not for a moment. But if they then want to impose some of their religious beliefs onto other people — for example, in relation to abortion or not using contraceptives — then I ask them to look at the evidence. I ask them to be much more careful about their beliefs.

Source: Salon.com

State of the Baha'i Blogosphere

It seems every day brings with it more and more blogs written by Baha'is. This is a good development. Surprisingly, the mention of the words Baha'i or Bahai are not showing a concomitant rise in the wider blogosphere:



But quantity isn't everything. Admittedly, most Baha'i blogs are rather very boring because they don't really *say* anything. Or atleast, say anything new. Most of them fall under two main categories:

- personal blogs
- aggregators

The first are blogs – mostly by Baha'i youth – written about their lives. They are usually uneventful. Perhaps their immediate social group would read them to keep up with a friend. I don't know about you but I really don't care to read about the minutia of someone's daily life; what music they are listening to *right now*, where they went to eat lunch, etc.

The second category are blogs which aggregate news about the Baha'i faith. Some of the more popular ones are bahaiblog.net and bahaiviews.blogspot.com. They regurgitate news or mentions of the word 'Bahai' from news sources or other websites, blogs, etc. My criticism of these types of blogs is that they are just cut and paste jobs with no thinking involved. Call me a traditionalist but I believe it is wrong to basically steal someone else's content for your blog. If you've got nothing to say then the best thing is to shut up.

But there are a few blogs out there trying to go beyond the confines of these two main categories. Among these new blogs, Baha'i Twenties (defunct) shows some promise. The idea of a collaborative blog is interesting. But it hasn't managed to get off the ground yet. Let's give it a bit more time and see. It reminds me a bit of Spiritual Degrees. But I hope Baha'i Twenties doesn't follow their fate.

For a list of quality blogs (containing new ideas, fresh thinking and actual convictions) check out the right hand side category under "*Blogs I Read*".

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I'm always fascinated *how* people find my blog. Sometimes it's through links, other times they hear about it from friends. But by far the most traffic I get is through the search engines: Google, Yahoo and MSN. Here is a snapshot of the top keywords that brought people to Baha'i Rants recently:

Search Term
shiraz bab
bahai cult behavior
nz bahai blog covenant breaker
mel gibson, jack lenz, iran
history of ruhi institute
mandy gronich
opus dei wilmette
mcglinn
varqa, yazd
susan berkman auxiliary board member
frank and mark marangella
abdul baha descendants
iran bahai apartheid sa
who's who peter smith

A Simple Suggestion to Improve Bahai Funds

Continuing with the intent of being more positive and actually suggesting alternatives or options which can actually improve things, I revisit a topic which I mentioned a while back, in my first post. I wrote:"I value decentralization, over centralization. Central planning and its proponents, assume that life is static, linear and mechanistic; that it can be categorized, numbered and therefore, understood and controlled. However, life is not like that. It is messy, chaotic and dynamic. Unfortunately, the now widely discarded 19th-century ideal of centralization permeates the Baha'i community. . . *Another example of centralization in the current Baha'i community is the funneling of donations from localities to the World Centre where they are expended without any disclosure or explanation – in contrast these funds could be used at the level where they are generated to build better communities.*"

I know that this is not just one of my pet peeves, but that it is one of the most common critiques Baha'is allow themselves to whisper about the current situation in the Baha'i world community. A few years ago, all communities around the world, almost without exception, sacrificed their own present and future needs in order to support the monumental Arc Projects. This was not just happenstance. NSAs and LSAs, in turn, were so directed by the House in two separate letters (one to all NSAs and one to selected NSAs).

Excerpt of the message to all NSAs, May 25 1999, from the Department of the Secretariat of the UHJ:

“The House of Justice draws your attention to the necessity for increased support of the Baha’i Fund at an international level with full confidence that the impressive record of sacrificial endeavor by the believers will be sustained in their response to the situation described here. The formulation of budgets at a national and local level should be carried out in the light of these conditions. Above all there should be no interruption to your sustained effort effort to assist the friends in your area to acquire a deeper understanding of the spiritual obligation binding upon all, irrespective of their circumstances, to contribute to the Funds of the Faith.”

And the excerpt from the message to selected NSAs, May 25 1999, from the Department of the Secretariat of the UHJ:

“It is surely evident to any observer of world events that human affairs are now volatile and subject to sudden and unforeseen changes. The friends have an opportunity to ensure that their resources are used for the enduring benefit of the Cause through their sacrificial and generous efforts to support its global activities, at this time when their financial circumstances are so favorable.”

The result was that the Arc was finished (well, almost). But the consequence was that the vast majority of local and national Baha’i communities around the world simply did not have the material means to improve their community’s lot. Many communities put major projects and investments on hold or simply transferred them to the Arc projects instead. Some of these were the purchase or improvement of community centers, Baha’i cemeteries or proclamation projects.

But now, Baha’is are asking, why are we continuing to funnel money to the NSA and then to the UHJ? Why don’t we begin to invest in our own communities? And yes, its true that you can “earmark” your donations to the Baha’i fund, but all that accomplishes is designating a final destination for it once it leaves your locality. It does not do anything to help your community directly.

Unless, that is, you decide to educate yourself and ask a few simple questions. A fellow Baha’i did just that and came up with the following (and was kind enough to pass it along so that more can know about it). Please note that depending on where you are, the laws

may be different. That doesn't really matter though, because at the heart of this is to arm yourself with knowledge and take a positive step to do something about what you believe in. Rather than whisper-whinging between nacho bites at the next feast with your friends.

The idea taps a Canadian tax law regarding charities (a category which legally includes the Baha'i Faith). A "Ten Year Gift" is a special kind of donation which has a condition attached to it. It stipulates that the charity receiving it must keep the funds for *at least* 10 years. The charity can not spend the donation until those 10 years are up. **But**, the charity *can* invest or otherwise employ the donation to earn a return or income, and spend that return or income (towards their normal charitable ends). Or, if they want, the charity can choose to re-invest the return or income during those 10 years and then spend the whole lump sum (re-invested returns and the original donation) after the expiration of 10 years. Or the charity can decide to reinvest the returns or income generated and continue to do so after the 10 year period is up, only withdrawing a small amount each year, thus allowing it to continue in perpetuity. Got all that?

This last choice is probably the best, in my view, because it allows a charity (or in our case, an LSA or NSA) the luxury of having a continual and (theoretically) inexhaustible source of income. But that's another ball of wax. Getting back to my main point.

What makes this type of donation extra neat is that the charity on the receiving end, can not by law, give "10 year gifts" to another charity (even a related one). So in our case, that would mean that once you give a 10 year gift to your local community in Canada, they must keep it and can not ship it off to the NSA or UHJ or elsewhere. That is, unless they want to break the law and risk having their charity license revoked by the government.

So how do you make such a donation? Its rather simple. You make it as you would normally (cash, check, etc.) but *at the same time* you attach the completed form below:

I hereby give $_____ to the LSA of _____ with the specific direction that the LSA hold this gift or any property substituted from it for a period of 10 years (or more).

(Signature of donor)

_____

Name of donor

_____

Date

So stop whinging. Here is a positive action step you can take to make sure that your local community has the material resources it needs for tomorrow and beyond. If you are outside of Canada, check your country's laws regarding charities, you may have something similar to this (especially if you are in a commonwealth country).

If you are in Canada and you do decide to make a donation of a 10 year gift, be sure to talk to your treasurer about it beforehand. Don't spring it on them and give them a heart-attack. The one's that I've consulted wouldn't know a 10 year gift if it lodged itself forcefully in their larynx. Be gentle. Educate them and tell them what their responsibilities are under the legal system.

For some reason, no one has informed the Baha'i local communities or treasurers, that something like this even exists.

I can't imagine why.

Sundry

Baha'i Rants is back after a well deserved summer hiatus. There is a lot to catch up on so lets get started with a quick round up of what has transpired recently.

BAHA'I NEWS ROUNDUP

Another Baha'i has been unenrolled. Larry Rowe from Canada had his membership withdrawn by the National Spriritual Assembly of Canada. Its mind boggling how idiotic the NSA's decision was because Larry clearly believes in Baha'u'llah and is a Baha'i. Rather than dealing with and talking about, the issues that he raised, the NSA decided to take the easy way and just boot him out. Hmmm…didn't Shoghi Effendi say something about 'dictatorial authority' and 'arbitrary power'? Larry worded his letter to the NSA in a very specific way to elicit a response to something which they vociferously deny and ignore. Rather than read the letter with wisdom, the NSA chose to read it like a heartless beaurocrat.

And sadly, another Baha'i may be destined for the same end. It all started when Brendan, a person I must confess impresses me with his eloquence and rapier sharp wits, started posting several essays on the internet (if curiousity is getting the better of you, they are in talk.religion.bahai and in the 'Files' section of Yahoo!Groups: Unenrolled Baha'i and Talisman). Of course, they are harmless opinions of one individual Baha'i. But since when did that stop the thought police? An alert and we must add, rather anal, Baha'i, breathlessly forwarded Brendan's postings to the Auxilliary Board Member for Protection, Shahkar Arjomand. Arjomand swiftly countered Brendan's words with his own. I feel it my duty – even though charges of cliche peddling will be levelled at me – to remind Brendan that when engaged in a battle of wits, one must have the compassion to abandon the field of battle when facing an opponent as utterly and wholly unarmed as Arjomand.

Being the good little trouper that he is, Arjomand went further and asked to meet Brendan to 'talk about his views'. Needless to say, this invitation was for a 'friendly and social' visit and had nothing to do with Arjomand's station as an ABM. Oh no, it was just a friend dropping by for a visit. Well, not exactly, as Brendan and Shahkar have never met. Lets say it was a friend*ly* visit … that was scheduled like a dentists appointment three weeks in advance (August 14). Oh and Arjomand is 'dropping by' … by driving more than an hour. But its just a social visit! Oh, erm, but Brendan must meet with Shahkar alone. None of his friends can be there for this 'friendly' visit and neither can his fiance be there. I may be naive but it sure is building up to be one hell of a Code Red. If I may offer Brendan an observation; ABMs for protection come for social visits the same way that, oh say, a Tyrannosaurus Rex gets a might peckish.

On a lighter note, Sen McGlinn's book on Baha'i views on theocracy has just been published by Kalimat Press. Its title, Church and State, is rather boring, but the content is sure to be anything but. Having read many of Sen's postings on Talisman, I can't wait to get my hands on this tome. I recommend that you buy this book, not only to learn about a very important and tragically misunderstood facet of the Baha'i Faith, but to also support a fantastic independent Baha'i publisher.

A RUMOR ON THE INTERNETS
TATSUYA ISHIDA
WE HAVE YOU IN OUR PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE... WE SWEAR TO YOU IN OUR COURTS...
WE SING ABOUT YOU AT BASEBALL GAMES... WE THANK YOU AT AWARDS SHOWS...
YOU'RE IN OUR SCHOOLS, OUR COURTS! OUR BALLPARKS! OUR MONEY! YOU'RE EVERYWHERE!
I just want to be in your heart.

I couldn't help but notice that Spritual Degrees hasn't put out anything in over three months. I hope it wasn't something I said.

And finally, its official; the end of the world is nigh. No, the four horsemen of the Apocalypse haven't galloped down Main Street. Its worse. Baha'is in the US have been teaching by going door-to-door (as reported from *American Baha'i* magazine). Yup, you know, knocking on people's door and starting a conversation with a total stranger about something as personal as their religious convictions. Some have defended this strategy saying *technically, its not proselytizing*. This reminds me of an obnoxious game my nephew used to play with me where he would hover his hand millimeters away from my face and add a raucous chorus of *I'm not touching you, I'm not touching you*….

GLOBAL ROUNDUP

Iran

Home to a lot of pistachios, murdering Mullahs, large deposits of oil, the two Baha'i sites for pilgrimage and just recently, a magnificently rigged election. Yes, 'the election' is over

and Baha'i Rants has egg all over its face. Rafsanjani did not win. On the bright side, Baha'i Rants has a lot of company being completely wrong because everyone (except Khamenei) was surprised by this. Yet, after all the noise and clatter of views and counterviews, nothing elemental has changed. As I've repeatedly said, no structural change will occur in Iran with the price of oil where it is because it gives the ruling kleptocracts too much leeway to fill in the gaps of a corrupt and decaying regime with petrodollars. After all, the cash that was given to hordes of Basijis (the fanatical militia controlled by Khamenei) to bully voters into supporting a dark horse candidate, has to come from somewhere.

Iran also recently executed two young men for the crime of homosexuality. This appalying wrong against humanity is even more shocking when you consider that one of them was not even 18 years old. The execution of a minor is illegal in Iran but then again, when have things happened according to the law (either moral, domestic or international) in Iran? This tragedy gives the Baha'i representatives to the United Nations an opportunity to prove that they exist to implement the principles of the Faith, irregardless of partisanship and partiality. Human rights are exactly that, human. And we as Baha'is must fight for them for all of humanity. Not just for Baha'is.

Chile

Home to Pablo Neruda, world famous BBQ and gauchos … and the latest Baha'i Temple. Well, *eventually* it will be built, we hope, and pray. But don't hold your breath. As I've mentioned in previous posts things got off to a rocky start. And things haven't exactly gotten any better. The site that has been purchased is in the middle of nowhere and as such requires a lot of work to prepare. Ground breaking hasn't happened yet and won't for a good while. Part of the difficulties have to do with technical challenges (dragging construction equipment and crew out to the back country) as well as legal and procedural ones (permits for water, hydro, sewer extensions, etc.) as well as environmental assessment and permits. Its an uphill climb (pun unintended). Even with the reservations expressed, Baha'i Rants wishes the project all the best and at the same time, acknowledges that it probably won't be finished for a good 2-3 years.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

Here is a small smattering of what you can look forward to in the following weeks and months:

What does Pythagoras have to do with the Baha'i Faith?
Continuing installments of *Its a Little Known Fact*
My pilgrima… I mean, visitation to Israel
Baha'i Speak
Reviews of Baha'i cyberspace discussion forums
Continuing installments of the *LA Study Class Newsletter*

No related posts.

Teaching vs. Proselytizing: UHJ Letter

A while back we talked about the difference between teaching and proselytizing. This is becoming more and more of an issue as Baha'is are being prodded to use more "direct" teaching methods. These involve going door to door in neighborhoods – something which we, at one point, were proud that we *didn't* do.

27 years ago someone was concerned about this and wrote to the Universal House of Justice. And they wrote back the better below. By the way, if you have a question for the UHJ, you can easily email them using this email address: secretariat @ bwc [dot] org

The first part deals with the question but it also veers off into a discussion of the Covenant and the difference between interpretation and legislation. I'm assuming that the questioner

brought these topics forward, otherwise, it is a stretch to link them to the question of proselytizing vs. teaching.

It is also interesting that at the end of the letter, the House of Justice says:

> For this reason a number of points are not expressed in the, National Baha'i Constitution (the Declaration of Trust and By-Laws of National Assemblies); these are left to each National Spiritual Assembly to decide for itself.

When in fact, the document in question was changed in recent history (from its previous wording) to disallow National Spiritual Assemblies from instituting such changes as term limits.

In any case, here is the complete letter:

The Universal House of Justice
The Baha'is World Centre
3 January 1982

To an individual Baha'i

Dear Baha'i Friend,
The Universal House of Justice has received your letter and has asked us to assure you that you should feel no diffidence in raising the sort of questions that you have expressed. It seems clear from your letter that you have been greatly attracted to the Message of Baha'u'llah and have accepted His Faith before, as you say, becoming "fully committed," and are, therefore, now having to face and resolve problems that many believers overcome before they declare their faith. The House of justice urges you not to let it worry you. All through life Baha'is are faced with tests of many kinds, and problems and doubts, but it is through facing and overcoming them that we grow spiritually.

On the particular issues that you raise, the House of Justice has instructed us to send you the following comments.

Teaching vs. Proselytizing
It is true that Baha'u'llah lays on every Baha'i the duty to teach His Faith. At the same time, however, we are forbidden to proselytize, so it is important for all believers to understand the difference between teaching and proselytizing. It is a significant difference

and, in some countries where teaching a religion is permitted, but proselytizing is forbidden, the distinction is made in the law of the land. Proselytizing implies bringing undue pressure to bear upon someone to change his Faith. It is also usually understood to imply the making of threats or the offering of material benefits as an inducement to conversion. In some countries mission schools or hospitals, for all the good they do, are regarded with suspicion and even aversion by the local authorities because they are considered to be material inducements to conversion and hence instruments of proselytization.

Baha'u'llah, in The Hidden Words, says, "O Son of Dust! The wise are they that speak not unless they obtain a hearing, even as the cup-bearer, who proffereth not his cup till he findeth a seeker, and the lover who crieth not out from the depths of his heart until he gazeth upon the beauty of his beloved …. ", and on page 55 of The Advent of Divine Justice, a letter which is primarily directed towards exhorting the friends to fulfill their responsibilities in teaching the Faith, Shoghi Effendi writes: "Care, however, should, at all times, be exercised, lest in their eagerness to further the international interests of the Faith they frustrate their purpose, and turn away, through any act that might be misconstrued as an attempt to proselytize and bring undue pressure upon them, those whom they wish to win over to their Cause." Some Baha'is sometimes overstep the proper bounds, but this does not alter the clear principle.

The responsibility of the Baha'is to teach the Faith is very great. The contraction of the world and the onward rush of events require us to seize every chance open to us to touch the hearts and minds of our fellowmen. The Message of Baha'u'llah is God's guidance for mankind to overcome the difficulties of this age of transition and move forward into the next stage of its evolution, and human beings have the right to hear it. Those who accept it incur the duty of passing it on to their fellowman. The slowness of the response of the world has caused and is causing great suffering; hence the historical pressure upon Baha'is to exert every effort to teach the Faith for the sake of their fellowmen. They should teach with enthusiasm, conviction, wisdom and courtesy, but without pressing their hearer, bearing in mind the words of Baha'u'llah: "Beware lest ye contend with any one, nay, strive to make him aware of the truth with kindly manner and most convincing exhortation. If your hearer respond, he will have responded to his own behoof, and if not, turn ye away from him, and set your faces towards God's sacred Court, the seat of resplendent holiness."

Considerations in the Application of Baha'i Social Teachings

The application and development of the social aspects of the Teachings is dependent on the stage of growth of the Baha'i community in each area, and on worldwide priorities. We are living in an age of transition, and as 'Abdu'l-Baha explained, we must, in order to succeed in our aims, sacrifice the important for the most important. The House of Justice, for example, had to turn down the request of certain believers to establish Baha'i schools in a Western country which already had a functioning state educational system; those Baha'i funds which are available for educational projects must be spent on the establishment and running of schools in areas where there are large Baha'i communities of poor people, with no adequate system of education available to them. In its answer, the House of Justice pointed out that if these friends, on their own initiative, wished to establish their own school, run on Baha'i lines, and financially self-supporting, they were entirely free to do so. This highlights an aspect of the matter which is often overlooked. The social services of Baha'is are not restricted to what they do as a community Every Baha'i has a duty to work and earn his living, and in choosing a career a Baha'i should consider not only its earning capacity but also the benefit of the work to his fellowmen. All over the world Baha'is are rendering outstanding services in this way.

When a Baha'i community is very small, there is little that it can do to implement the social teachings of the Faith (beyond their impact on the behavior of individual believers), because such a community with the resources in funds and manpower at its disposal is but a drop in the ocean in comparison with the many large agencies, governmental and private, which are engaged in social improvement. When the Baha'i community grows sufficiently large, however, its activities can and must proliferate and diversify. This development is already taking place in many parts of the world. In India, for example, the New Era School in Panchgani, which has been developing remarkably for a number of years, is closely associated with a rural development project in the villages close by that is having dramatically favorable results in the life of the villagers. In the province of Madhya Pradesh, where there are hundreds of thousands of Baha'is, the Rabbani School in Gwalior is educating children from the villages of the area in the Teachings of the Faith, in academic subjects and in agriculture, so that when they return to their home villages, these pupils not only promote the Faith but will influence their growth and development in every way. In Ecuador, as you no doubt know, the size of the Baha'i community, scattered over inaccessible terrain in the high Andes, made it both necessary and possible some years ago to establish a Baha'i radio station.2 "Radio Baha'i," as it is known, broadcasts not only

about the Faith, but has programs concerning health, agriculture, literacy and so on. It has now become so well established and highly regarded that it has been able to apply for and receive a Canadian Government grant through CIDA to finance the development of certain social service activities. Thus it can be seen that once the Baha'i community attains a certain stature it is able to work in fruitful collaboration with non-Baha'i agencies in its social activities.

A further aspect of this kind of work is the collaboration between the Baha'i International Community and the United Nations. Having consultative status with both ECOSOC and UNICEF, and long association with the Department of Public Information, the Baha'i International Community is able to take part in conferences and consultations on many aspects of human development, both from the point of view of the Baha'i Teachings and with the background of its extensive experience in meeting the problems of developing countries, such as illiteracy, the status of women, tribalism, racial prejudice, and so on.

As you can see, all these developments relate directly to the teaching work inasmuch as the Baha'i communities must reach a certain size before they can begin to implement many of them. How, for example, can a Baha'i community demonstrate effectively the abolition of prejudices which divide the inhabitants of a country until it has a cross-section of those inhabitants within its ranks? A seed is the vital origin of a tree and of a tremendous importance for that reason, but it cannot produce fruit until it has grown into a tree and flowered and fruited. So a Baha'i community of nine believers is a vital step, since it can bring into being for that locality the divine institution of the Local Spiritual Assembly, but it is still only a seed, and needs to grow in size and in the diversity of its members before it can produce really convincing fruit for its fellow citizens.

One could say, however, that the Baha'i communities could assist in social development from a very early stage in their development by supporting the activities of other groups who are, at this point, more numerous and powerful. To some extent this is true, provided that such involvement does not divert the efforts of the friends from the more fundamentally important teaching work or involve them in the disputes of non-Baha'i rival groups.

Humanity's Most Urgent Need

The teaching work is of primary importance for this reason: the most urgent need of human beings is to recognize the Manifestation of God and thereby to learn how to collaborate

constructively. All over the world tremendous efforts are being made to improve the lot of mankind or of parts of mankind, but most of these efforts are frustrated by the conflicts of aims, by corruption of the morals of those involved, by mistrust, or by fear. There is no lack of material resources in the world if they are properly used. The problem is the education of human beings in the ultimate and most important purpose of life and in how to weld the differences of opinion and outlook into a united constructive effort. Baha'is believe that God has revealed the purpose of life, has shown us how to attain it, has provided the ways in which we can work together and, beyond that, has given mankind the assurance both of continuing divine guidance and of divine assistance. As people learn and follow these teachings their efforts will produce durable results. In the absence of these teachings, a lifetime of effort only too often ends in disillusionment and the collapse of all that has been built.

It is not easy for people to learn the Baha'i way, to overcome their inherited prejudices or to resist their personal temptations. This way takes time, is subject to checks and backsliding, but one can see, looking at the past 138 years, that there is an overall advance that is astonishing in the light of the obstacles to be overcome, and is accelerating with every passing decade.

Obstacle to Progress: Getting Sucked Into Prevailing Attitudes

One of the great obstacles to progress is the tendency of Baha'is to be sucked into the general attitudes and disputes that surround them, to be influenced, for example, as you yourself pointed out, by the prevailing attitude to marriage so that the divorce rate becomes a problem within the Baha'i community itself which should be an example to the rest of society in such matters. Involvement in politics and controversial questions is another aspect of the same phenomenon. In one of His Tablets Baha'u'llah warns the Baha'is: "Dispute not with any one concerning the things of this world and its affairs, for God hath abandoned them to such as have set their affection upon them. Out of the whole world He hath chosen for Himself the hearts of men — hearts which the hosts of revelation and of utterance can subdue." As you realize, this cannot mean that Baha'is must not be controversial since, in many societies, being a Baha'i is itself a controversial matter. The central importance of this principle of avoidance of politics and controversial matters is that Baha'is should not allow themselves to be drawn into the disputes of the many conflicting elements of the society around them. The aim of the Baha'is is to reconcile, to heal divisions, to bring about tolerance and mutual respect among men, and this aim is

undermined if we allow ourselves to be swept along by the ephemeral passions of others. This does not mean that Baha'is cannot collaborate with any non-Baha'i movement; it does mean that good judgment is required to distinguish those activities and associations which are beneficial and constructive from those which are divisive.

The Uniqueness of the Baha'i Covenant

The House of Justice hopes that these explanations will help you to understand some of the aspects of the Faith that have been troubling you. The crux of the matter, as you realize, is the acceptance of spiritual authority and what this implies. You express the fear that the authority conferred upon Abdu'l-Baha, the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice could lead to a progressive reduction in the "available scope for personal interpretation," and that 11 the actual writings of the Manifestation will have less and less import," and you instance what has happened in previous Dispensations. The House of Justice suggests that, in thinking about this, you contemplate the way the Covenant of Baha'u'llah has actually worked, and you will be able to see how very different its processes are from those of, say, the development of the law in Rabbinical Judaism or the functioning of the Papacy in Christianity. The practice in the past in these two religions, and also to a great extent in Islam, has been to assume that the Revelation given by the Founder was the final, perfect revelation of God's Will to mankind, and all subsequent elucidation and legislation has been interpretative in the sense that it aimed at applying this basic Revelation to the new problems and situations that have arisen. The Baha'i premises are quite different. Although the Revelation of Baha'u'llah is accepted as the Word of God and His Law as the Law of God, it is understood from the outset that Revelation is progressive, and that the Law, although the Will of God for this Age, will undoubtedly be changed by the next Manifestation of God. Secondly, only the written text of the Revelation is regarded as authoritative. There is no Oral Law as in Judaism, no Tradition of the Church as in Christianity, no *Hadith* as in Islam. Thirdly, a clear distinction is drawn between interpretation and legislation. Authoritative interpretation is the exclusive prerogative of Abdu'l-Baha and the Guardian, while infallible legislation is the function of the Universal House of Justice.

If you study the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha and of the Guardian, you will see how tremendously they differ from the interpretations of the Rabbis and the Church. They are not a progressive fossilization of the Revelation, they are for the most part expositions which throw a clear light upon passages which may have been considered obscure, they

point up the intimate interrelationship between various teachings, they expound the implications of scriptural allusions, and they educate the Baha'is in the tremendous significances of the Words of Baha'u'llah. Rather than in any way supplanting the Words of the Manifestation, they lead us back to them time and again.

Authoritative vs. Individual interpretation

There is also an important distinction made in the Faith between authoritative interpretation, as described above, and the interpretation which every believer is fully entitled to voice. Believers are free, indeed are encouraged, to study the Writings for themselves and to express their understanding of them. Such personal interpretations can be most illuminating, but all Baha'is, including the one expressing the view, however learned he may be, should realize that it is only a personal view and can never be upheld as a standard for others to accept, nor should disputes ever be permitted to arise over differences in such opinions.

Interpretation and Legislation

The legislation enacted by the Universal House of Justice is different from interpretation. Authoritative interpretation, as uttered by Abdu'l-Baha and the Guardian, is a divinely guided statement of what the Word of God means. The divinely inspired legislation of the Universal House of Justice does not attempt to say what the revealed Word means-it states what must be done in cases where the revealed Text or its authoritative interpretation is not explicit. It is, therefore, on quite a different level from the Sacred Text, and the Universal House of justice is empowered to abrogate or amend its own legislation whenever it judges the conditions make this desirable. Moreover, the attitude to legislation is different in the Baha'i Faith. The human tendency in past Dispensations has been to want every question answered and to arrive at a binding decision affecting every small detail of belief or practice. The tendency in the Baha'i Dispensation, from the time of Baha'u'llah Himself, has been to clarify the governing principles, to make binding pronouncements on details which are considered essential, but to leave a wide area to the conscience of the individual. The same tendency appears also in administrative matters. The Guardian used to state that the working of National Spiritual Assemblies should be uniform in essentials but that diversity in secondary matters was not only permissible but desirable. For this reason a number of points are not expressed in the, National Baha'i Constitution (the Declaration of Trust and By-Laws of National Assemblies); these are left to each National Spiritual Assembly to decide for itself.

The Covenant of Baha'u'llah

The Covenant is the "axis of the oneness of the world of humanity' because it preserves the unity and integrity of the Faith itself and protects it from being disrupted by individuals who are convinced that only their understanding of the Teachings is the right one-a fate that has overcome all past Revelations. The Covenant is, moreover, embedded in the Writings of Baha'u'llah Himself. Thus, as you clearly see, to accept Baha'u'llah is to accept His Covenant; to reject His Covenant is to reject Him.

The House of Justice asks us to assure you of its loving prayers at the Sacred Threshold for your guidance in your efforts to arrive at a greater understanding of this wonderful Revelation.

With loving greetings,
The Universal House of Justice

LA Class Newsletters: Introduction

I've decided to transcribe the Los Angeles Baha'i Study Class Newsletter for your reading pleasure. Although the originals are available on the internet already, they are scanned gif files of the photocopied documents and as such, can not be read easily, nor can they be accessed by search engines in this format. Here is a very uninviting example.To those not familiar with the newsletter, a concise introduction is in order.

Around 30 years ago, a small group of Baha'is in the LA area created a forum in which they could comfortably discuss topics of interest to them about the Faith. They felt that an appropriate space did not exist (with firesides being for the intruduction of the Faith to seekers, not its analysis and discussion). As a result of their discussions, they produced an informal newsletters which was written and distributed to the group, as well as a few other interested parties. What transpired in those meetings, the discussions that they yielded and ultimately, the resulting response from the Administration, is now a part of Baha'i history.The newsletters are self explanatory so I will limit myself to brief observations when I post each one.

I would like to ask that you compare and contrast these notes that will appear in this space shortly (and the imagined lively discussions that gave rise to them) with the current study

course being promoted in the Baha'i international community. Whereas Ruhi is soporific and childishly simple, these classes are lively and complex; whereas Ruhi is clear-cut and involves the spoonfeeding of information, these classes are sometimes confusing, difficult and ask of the participants introspection, research and thought; whereas Ruhi is riddled with errors that are hoisted on to an unbeknowst audience, the errors in this course come from unavoidable stumbles along the earnest journey to deepen in the Writings. To me, comparing Ruhi to these classes held 30 years ago is like comparing a rusted butter knife to a tempered Samurai sword.

The other observation I would like to make is how much the topics, concerns and general discussions in these classes held some 30 years ago are still relevant. When I read them I am struck by how much things have not changed at all. I have my own ideas about the whys of this but I will leave that for another time.

Finally, a few thoughts on the process that I went through: the original text is from a typewriter and can at times, be difficult to read (as you can see from the above example). This is especially true with numbers and dates where context is of no help. When this occurs, you will find (?) or square brackets with explanatory notes. I have not added nor removed any text; with two exceptions. One being the removal of personal information (such as home addresses and phone numbers) or other superfluous information. And the second, being the insertion of my best guess (from context and visual clues) regarding illegible, missing or smudged text. In such a case, I have, again, in square brackets, noted the nature of the information and the reason for its removal or addition. As well, in a few instances I have corrected spelling errors while doing my utmost to maintain the same punctuation, syntax and formatting. But I'm sure that I've also missed a few (or made a few new ones of my own) so when you spot them, drop me a note.

I will be posting the first shortly and thereafter, in chronological order, about two per week.

The Baha´i Approach to SED

I know it is easy to fall into a trap of excessive negativity and simply become a source of criticism just for the heck of it. In order to not be so charged, I wanted to share positive ideas regarding the Baha´i approach to social and economic development.The Baha´i

Writings contain repeated and intense guidance that we are to help our fellow man, to feed the poor, heal the sick, aid the helpless, etc. They are at once beautiful words as well as extremely high standards to which we must strive. Baha´u´llah mentions this duty, so does Abdu´l-Baha, and so does Shoghi Effendi. I really don´t want to fill up these paragraphs with quote after quote because those interested can do a simple search, either at the Baha´i online library or at Ocean.

Yet, for the most part, the Baha´i international community has not heeded these clear and repeated instructions. We have not really done much. Sure, there is an SED office at the Baha´i World Centre and there are ongoing projects under their supervision. But they are but drops to an ocean. As well, the priority given to them by Baha´u´llah and Abdu´l-Baha have been superceded by other priorities put forward by the UHJ and the ITC.

Primarily, the priority is to teach and to expand the numerical growth of the Baha´i international community. When questions arise as to the reconciliation of these two priorities, words to the following effect are often cited:

“Because love for our fellowmen and anguish at their plight are essential parts of a true Baha’i’s life, we are continually drawn to do what we can to help them. It is vitally important that we do so whenever the occasion presents itself, for our actions must say the same thing as our words — but this compassion for our fellows must not be allowed to divert our energies into channels which are ultimately doomed to failure, causing us to neglect the most important and fundamental work of all. There are hundreds of thousands of well-wishers of mankind who devote their lives to works of relief and charity, but a pitiful few to do the work which God Himself most wants done: the spiritual awakening and regeneration of mankind.”

(From the Universal House of Justice Messages 1963-1986, p. 126)

Basically, it boils down to the argument that the best thing that Baha´is can do for their fellow man is to teach them the Baha´i Faith. But where does this leave the thousands who are destitute, sick, hungry, orphaned and helpless?

To me such an argument is revulsive and wholly incompatible with the words of Baha´u´llah and Abdu´l-Baha. Did the Master stop a poor man on the street and teach him, or did He stop and duck in an alley way to remove His shirt to give to him? Did He ask what religion the poor man professed? or whether he had heard of the Baha´i Faith?

This sort of lukewarm, shrugging of the shoulders and moving on, response is what we witnessed with the Tsunami tragedy of late last year.

Does the person without food really want to listen to your great news about a new religion? or would they rather eat something and feed their family? Would the sick prefer to be cured or to hear of a new Manifestation of God? Put yourself in those shoes right now and think about it for one second.

If these acts are "doomed to fail" and are not the "work that God wants us to do", then pray tell why did Abdu´l-Baha, the Exemplar, repeatedly behave in this manner? and why did such acts take such a high prominence in the Writings?

I think that, as in many things, Baha´is must learn to practice moderation. Moderation here means that one doesn´t ignore the wailing of the poor or the plight of the sick (stepping over them as a triffling inconvenience of the "Old World Order" on our way to our 5th repetition of Ruhi), neither does it mean that we give up teaching the Faith or deepening.

So where are the positive ideas, you ask?

The first idea is simple, to encourage Baha´is to exit their self-imposed bubble and go out into the real world to help those in need. This can be done in a rather simple way. Making a list of charities and organizations who already do have the infrastructure and systems in place but need human resources. Baha´is can volunteer a few hours a week or month and in so doing, they are not only implementing the Writings about helping our fellow man, but they are doing themselves a huge favour. They are getting out and actually talking with real people, dealing with real problems and co-operating with those on the front lines trying to do something about them. Don´t you think this is much better than to sit in a classroom and rot your brain with the mindnumbing, parrot-like repetition that is Ruhi?

All you need to do is to make a list of like minded organizations in your community and bring it to the Feast and make a short presentation (and be the first to volunteer to set an example). Unfortunately though, most Baha´i communities have become so dense that they will probably cock their heads and ask you, is this approved by the LSA/NSA/UHJ/ITC?

ok, ok, ok . . . I promised to be positive. On to the second idea:

This is a bit more complicated and requires that your whole community be on the same page (more or less). The idea is to pick a sister Baha´i community somewhere way out there in the world. The only stipulation being that they be in a developing or marginalized part of the world and that they have some similarities with your language and culture. For example, the Baha´is of Lisboa can pick a small community in Brasil (say somewhere in the interior). The aim of such partnering is to encourage inter-community communication and allow the Lisboa (in our example) to send funds and other resources to the Brasilian community in need.

The beauty of this sort of partnership is that Lisboa doesn´t need to send a lot of money as their currency (Euro) is quite strong against the Brasilian Real. So a €50 transfer, which is not much for a community such as them, would mean the world when exchanged into Reals. But it doesn´t have to be just money – the community can send books, for example. The actual help will have to come about after an initial dialogue between the two communities. As well, there are many unquantifiable benefits accrued to both communities in such a partnership.

I´m not suggesting a simple wealth transfer but a two way relationship where both parties gain – albeit in different ways. Also, the point of this is to allow the economically poorer community to help itself and improve its conditions – not to simply receive hand outs. Of course, this idea is not simple and implementing it appropriately would take time and a lot of loving patience on both sides. But just think about the benefits and the fruits that it can yield.

There you have it, two positive ideas. Now go run with it.

No related posts.

The Biggest Mistake Baha’is Make

This post was inspired by a comment left by “jaap”. S/he said:

> Dear Baquia,

> Thank you for your thoughts, claiming that indepedent investigation of truth "precedes everything" is an absolute statement and therefore it excludes all other arguments.Don't you see that this argument bites itself in it's tail?
> Obviously I am not able to provide conclusive answers, but I do feel that independant investigation of truth can be used to determine in which direction you want your soul to travel.Once your direction is chosen do you need to continue questioning your direction through indep. invest.?

I sincerely hope and pray that I never join fellow Baha'is who seem to be sleep walking through it all. Never questioning, never thinking, never wondering 'what if?', never contemplating change or improvement, never doing anything different, etc. This is spiritual apathy. It is being 'dead' while seemingly alive. It is being stuck in a rut: go to Ruhi, memorize some quotes, come home, go to feast, go to devotionals, etc. Wash, rinse, repeat. But never actually devote any time to critical thinking… what exactly am I doing? and more importantly, *why*?

This is *taqlid* – an anachronism abolished by Baha'u'llah. Alison was kind enough to find some specific quotes from Baha'u'llah regarding this topic.

Aside from Baha'u'llah's eradication of this Shi'ite tradition, simple logic will show the fallacy in "jaap"'s thinking:

If it were not for continuous questioning and an unceasing search for truth, *no one* is history would have ever found the Manifestation of God!

They would instead think and act, as "jaap" proposes: *I already have the truth. I have conviction. Why do I need to question? why do I need to think? why do I need to continue searching?*

Think of it… hundreds of years later when the next Manifestation of God comes to this world, should Baha'is of that time do as other humans have done in the past? deny, torture, and ultimately kill Her/Him? saying, "we have set our souls on their journey, we no longer need independent investigation of truth to determine the validity of your claim'?

Independant investigation of truth is not a destination, it is a journey with no end… for its ultimate goal is the attainment of God, Truth, the Essence of Reality.

How sad, how sad, to be so blinded by prejudice and ignorance while professing to possess true understanding.

You know, this reminds me of an anecdote from a friend who was travel teaching in a remote part of the world. He was talking to a simple farmer out in the poor country side of a third world country about the Baha'i Faith. After his 'schpeil', the farmer turned to the idealistic young man facing him and said, 'Look all that is very well, but I have everything I need. I have my farm, my wife, my children are healthy, I have food to eat, and a good life. I don't need this'.

My friend stood there debating with himself how to answer and before he knew it, he had blurted out, 'Well, how then are you different from this cow? (pointing to a content cow munching on grass) It also has food, a nice stable, and a good life.'

After he realized what he had just said, his heart skipped a beat. He couldn't believe it! He's supposed to be teaching the Faith! And he'd gone and insulted a stranger who would think all Baha'is are rude. He wanted to bolt but stood there nailed to the ground by the fear that the farmer just might take a swing at him.

bahai-cow.png
How now, Baha'i cow?

Instead, the farmer looked him in the eye and after a few beats said, 'Let me see that pamphlet again. And leave one of those declaration cards.'

No related posts.

The Case of Ms.Kazemi

As Baha'is we sometimes forget that the brutality of the Iranian regime is not restricted to just us. They punish equally all perceived or real threats to their powerbase.

So it was with Zahra Kazemi, an Iranian born, Canadian citizen. She was in Iran on July 2003, working as a photo-journalist for a Montreal publication when she was taken into custody by Iranian authorities. Later it became known that she had been arrested because

she was taking pictures of a prison. It also became public, after some time, that she had died while in custody.

The versions of how she went from a healthy, very much alive journalist to a very bruised and dead corpse differ. In response to demands of the Canadian government for an inquiry, the IRI put together a kangaroo court and its 'official' finding was that while under arrest, Ms. Kazemi had gone on a hunger strike; which reduced her blood sugar; which in turn caused her to faint and fall down; which resulted in her knocking her head on the floor and dying as a result of a brain hemorrhage.

Meanwhile, those that don't believe in the stories of the IRI (the Easter bunny, Santa Claus and other evil concoctions) held a different version. One that was much more gruesome and tragic. One that involved the flagrant violation of international law and human rights.

All we and the family of Ms. Kazemi received from the IRI were repeated tellings of their version and a hurried funeral in Iran. The Iranian regime denied all of the family's request to have the body flown back to Canada. They also said that since the court finding was final, no one would be punished for what had happened.

Up until a few weeks ago, the world didn't have real proof for either version. But that was before Dr. Shahran Azam and his wife fled Iran with the sole aim of bearing witness to the truth of this case. Dr. Azam, you see was the emergency doctor in charge of the emergency ward the night that the badly beaten and bruised body of Ms. Kazemi was wheeled in from Evin prison.

The testimony that he gave the world – once safely out of Iran – was chilling and graphic. Through his testimony we now know that Ms. Kazemi was not only beaten but she was systematically tortured and brutally raped repeatedly. Her body simply gave up after taking about a week of such punishment.

The IRI for its part, true to form, is denying that such a doctor even exists. They are also denying the new request of the Canadian government, for a forensic examination, claiming that no examination by a panel of experts is called for. The judicial finding, they again assert, is final and binding.

What really breaks my heart is seeing the family of Ms. Kazemi being forced to fight on two fronts – one the corrupt and vile IRI and the second the limp and weak Canadian

government. Its time that the Canadian government grew a backbone and actually stood up for its citizens and human rights around the world. To date, all that Canada has done has been to pull its ambassador from Tehran (and then put in another one a few months later) and to emit a lot of empty rhetoric.

Meanwhile the mullah's go right on entering and exiting Canada, using it as their playground as well as a platform to launder and invest vast sums of money they have looted from the Iranian people.

Here's what I would do if I were in charge (each would follow one month's grace period to gauge a reaction from the IRI):

1. Pull out the Ambassador of Canada from Iran
2. Expell the Iranian Ambassador from Canada
3. Sever all official ties (go through a third party like the Swiss)
4. Severly restrict Iranian travel to Canada (impose a visa fee of $50,000/person)
5. Cut economic ties with Iran (cancel contracts, use tarriffs on imports from Iran and impose a total creeping embargo)
6. Freeze IRI assets within Canada and (bank accounts, real estate, etc.)
7. Freeze assets held by persons tied to the Iranian government
8. Confiscate both
9. Turn over these assets (est. $3 Billion) to a Victim's Fund
10. Use the money from the Victim's Fund to take the IRI to International Court
11. Use the money to compensate Ms. Kazemi's family and other victims (& families)
12. Use UN influence to put pressure on Iran's human rights violations

I think you have to ratchet up the pressure and I think you have to hit them where it hurts. Realistically, mullah's care about one thing: money. Always have. Always will. So until you hurt them there, you don't really even have their attention.

Of course, it doesn't help that I'm not the person in charge of things over in Canada and neither does it help that those that are, are now embroiled in a huge scandal and utterly distracted from the Kazmi case.

If I'm allowed a digression from the main point…the scandal which is distracting them, in case you haven't heard, is about something which happened a while time ago when Canada was going through a referendum which risked splitting the country apart (Quebec, a

predominantly French province wanted to separate from the rest of the English speaking part). It turns out that during the 1995 Quebec referendum, the then ruling party (which happens to be the Liberals and the same ruling party as now) hired some advertising agencies and promotional agencies to help sell the “Yes” side – the side that wanted to keep things whole.

These government contracts where rather large. And they were given to persons who were long time allies of the Liberal party. Nothing surprising there, really. But it goes one step further. Not only were these contracts given to cronies; they had to give kickbacks to those who were awarding the contracts. As they say, power corrupts. And it seems that Liberal power corrupts liberally.

The only reason that the public found out about these shenanigans is that a very hard working and astute public figure with a thankless job – the Auditor General – found some transactions rather fishy and simply would not let the matter rest.

Makes you think a little doesn’t it? I mean if it weren’t for the Auditor General we probably wouldn’t be any wiser about this corruption. It makes me think also what sort of things an ‘Auditor General’ may find fishy in the Baha’i Funds. That is if we had an Auditor General in the Baha’i Faith. But that’s a whole different ball of wax.

The Challenge of Homosexuality

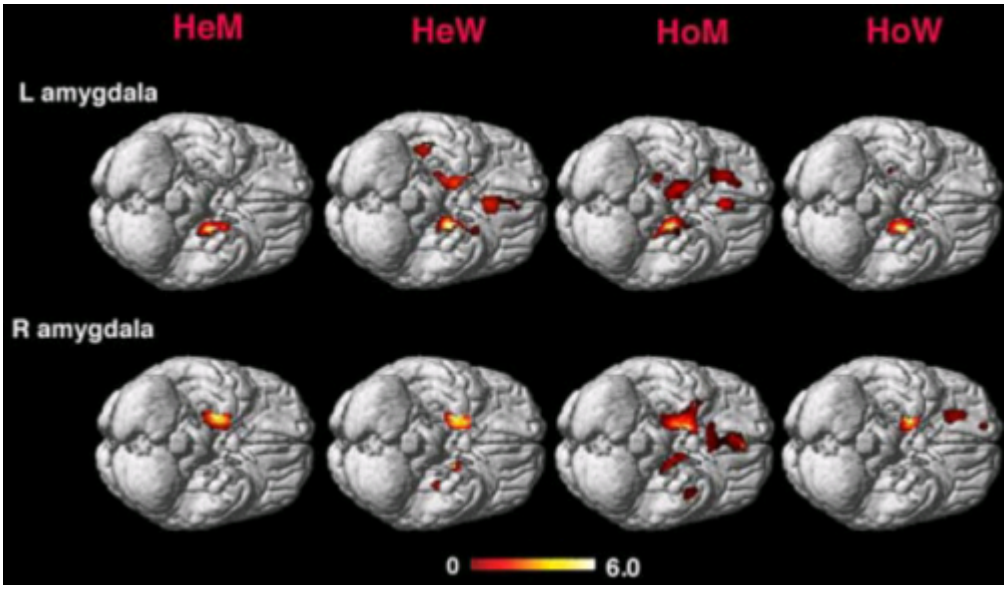
A recent research report out of Stockholm shows that the structure and function of homosexual brains is similar to that of the opposite sex. That is, a homosexual man’s brain is similar to that of a heterosexual woman’s brain. The study’s sample size was only 90 persons: 25 heterosexual women (HeW), 25 heterosexual men (HeM), 20 homosexual men (HoM), and 20 homosexual women (HoW).

Previous research had shown that men and women’s brains were “wired” differently. This research showed that there was a similar difference between sexual orientation. So finally we have scientific proof that women love to go shopping with their gay male friends.

Using PET and MRI scans which measured blood flow the study showed:

- The brains of heterosexual men (HeM) and homosexual women (HoW) were similar in that the volumes of their two brain hemispheres were not symmetrical (rightward cerebral asymmetry).
- The brains of homosexual men (HoM) and heterosexual women (HeW) were similar in that the volumes of their two brain hemispheres were symmetrical.
- There were also opposite sex similarities between the gay and heterosexual participants in the way their amygdalae connected.

The authors of the study conclude: "The results cannot be primarily ascribed to learned effects, and they suggest a linkage to neurobiological entities". You can read the report here. The next step is to find what exactly accounts for the difference and by what mechanism it is activated.



More and more science is taking baby steps towards an explanation of homosexuality that is anchored in biological rather than behavioral basis. That is, it may eventually offer conclusive proof that homosexuality arises from human genetic makeup. Some scientists are persuaded already by the present findings of this and other research but not all.

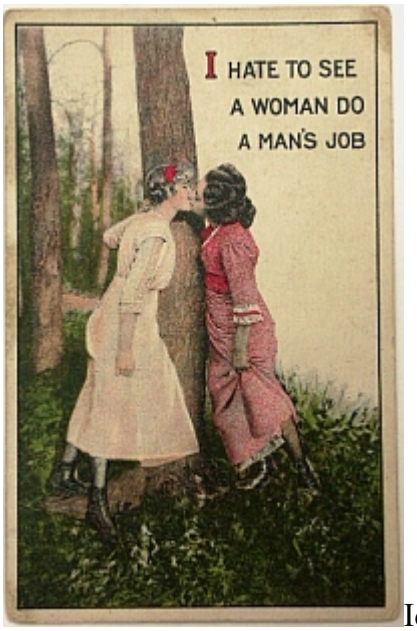
We are certainly not there yet but the trend from recent research reports points that way. If this is indeed realized at some time in the future, then I believe it will present the Baha'is with a severe challenge because most believe that homosexuality is an aberration from the

"natural" and that, more importantly, it is a "spiritual affliction" which can be overcome by expressing a moral choice and through conscious effort (such as prayer).

Such views would become anachronistic if homosexuality is shown to be a genetic substrate wholly outside a person's volition and choice.

Here is a thought provoking essay on "Sex and Values" from the late R. Jackson Armstrong-Ingram.

The Challenge of Homosexuality – Part Deux



Ideas are like hugs – much better when they are shared. And minds are like umbrellas- they work better when they are open.

With that in mind, I hope the discussion continues from the previous location: The Challenge of Homosexuality.

As I explained, the reason for this change of venue is to rescue my poor, exhausted mySQL database from the non-stop barrage you have put it through. At around 650 comments I was afraid it would finally give way one of these days and take the whole blog with it. I've taken other measures to fortify the blog but won't go into the boring technical details.

We leave the discussion with Steve requesting some clarification from Farhan. Masud suggesting that the UHJ has "self-executing" privileges and does not need to legislate on everything. And we hear that Ted Haggard is not gay! (he just keeps on having sex with men). Oh and Daniel brought to our attention a petition for LGBT rights.

If that isn't enough to kick things off here, indulge me in sharing something I read recently on Baha'i LiveJournal; suivreletoile wrote…

> **homosexuality and the Faith**
> I pretty much know the Faith's position on homosexuality, I'm just wondering more about the administration side of it.
>
> If somebody is gay, the LSA or NSA can take their declaration card away? And therefor prohibit them from going to Feast, etc?

Someone anonymously wrote a reply which many approved of:

> I do not speak for the Administration, but from more than half a century of Baha'i administrative experience, it is my understanding that this problem (if you want to call it a problem) is like any other problem in the Faith. That is, if one disobeys a Baha'i law, it is not of concern to the administration of the Faith UNLESS one does so publicly and in such a way as to bring criticism upon the Faith itself. No one escapes life without breaking some of God's rules from time to time either deliberately or inadvertently. It is a paramount principle of the Faith that one's adherence to Baha'i law is between the individual and God. It is no one else's business. However, if that violation brings disrespect or criticism upon the Faith and the Baha'i community, it becomes the business of the community. In the last analysis, it is between the individual and God. But the Baha'i community has the right to expect those who call themselves "Baha'i" to behave in such a way as to not bring discredit on the Baha'i Faith and its community of believers. We all have our burdens to bear in trying to adhere to Baha'i principles and we should not criticize or judge others for their problems or struggles so as not to invite judgment on ourselves for our own failures. As individuals we need to concern ourselves without our own struggles. The community (through the administrative process) has the responsibility to maintain the public image of the Faith. Even when the

> community disenfranchises someone by removing their administrative rights, the final judgment rests with God and God alone.

Sadly I didn't fall over myself in fawning adulation over this reply like some at that forum. My eyebrows wrinkled instead in confusion… I imagined a loving homosexual couple who are married according to the civil laws of the land they live in and who are raising a child or children in a stable and safe home environment. If they declare their faith in Baha'u'llah and join his community…

What Baha'i law have they broken exactly?

How would they be bringing "criticism upon the Faith itself" exactly?

How would they be besmirching the "public image of the Faith"?

I wrote as much to inquire from the "anonymous" contributor on LJ Baha'i. But as is usual with anything that doesn't meet the hair trigger standards of the fanatical moderators on that forum my comment was censored.

While a scientific challenge may be off in the near or far future, this challenge is right here, right now.

I still wonder though. And my eyebrows remain wrinkled. Won't you unwrinkle them?

While you're at it… and I speak now to fellow Baha'is around the world who happen to be heterosexual, please tell me when and under what circumstances you chose to be heterosexual.

You see, if we say that homosexuality is a choice and that it is an "aberration" to be corrected with prayer, meditation, etc. then I can't help but wonder when it was that you, a heterosexual made the decision to be… well, a heterosexual.

Don't get me wrong, I don't have an issue with you being a hetero nor asking you to justify it in any way. I'm just curious when and where you were when you made the conscious decision to be one.

You did make such a choice, right?

The Circle is Complete

The House of Justice has lost no time in appointing two new members of the ITC to replace those which were elected to serve on the UHJ. Ahh. . . the circle is now complete. ITC members move up to the UHJ, and then turn around and appoint new members of the ITC, who will in the near future move to the UHJ, and round and round we go!

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
Baha'is World Centre " P.O. Box 155 " 31 001 Haifa, Israel
Tel: 972 (4) 835 8358 " Fax: 972 (4) 835 8280 " Email: secretariat@bwc.org

Transmitted by email
TO: All National Spiritual Assemblies
DATE: 24 March 2005

MESSAGE:
With joyful hearts we announce the appointment of Gustavo Correa and Stephen Hall as Counsellor members of the International Teaching Centre.

The Universal House of Justice
cc: The Hand of the Cause Dr. "Al?-Mu.ammad Varq??
International Teaching Centre
Continental Boards of Counsellors Counsellors

****

Stephan Hall was a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia for a long time. And then around 2004 became a Counsellor for Australia-Asia. Basically, a career beaurocrat.

New ITC Counsellor – & future UHJ member – Gustavo Correa.

Gustavo Correa – along with fellow Baha'is, Bushrui, Poostchi and Lyberth – is a Creative Member of the Club of Budapest – an organization founded by Ervin Laszlo (akin to the Club of Rome). But his day job is (or rather, *was*) the Director of FUNDAEC in Columbia. Oh and he's also married to Arbab's daughter.

This is the third person (after Arbab, and Lample) who moves from the closely knit circle of Baha'is from Columbia/FUNDAEC/The Ruhi Foundation into a position of power within the Baha'i world community. Just another one of those coincidences, I guess. It has nothing to do with the group-think which has got a strangle hold on current Baha'i administration. Nothing whatsoever.

Just move along now.

This entry was posted in Administrative Order by Baquia. Bookmark the permalink.

- *http://bahaisonline.net Steve Marshall*

  Just as you predicted, Gustavo Correa has been elected to the House, along with fellow ITC member, Shahriar Razavi.

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- *burning*

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  In a trb post way back in Jan 2004

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  Susan Maneck poured cold water on it because of his youth. Back at ya Susan!!!

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- Pingback: Meet the New Universal House of Justice at Baha'i Rants

- *Craig Parke*

[quote comment="49247"]Just as you predicted, Gustavo Correa has been elected to the House, along with fellow ITC member, Shahriar Razavi.[/quote]

I must admit that the rise of the ITC Faith is completely fascinating. It is right out of the Cosmic History of the Human Race 101. Looks like none of these guys seem to be familiar with the Hindu Board Game "Layla". Maybe that would make a very good Ruhi Book topic? That is one I would really love to "tutor". It is the modern secular British Game "Snakes and Ladders". But the original version was a sacred spiritual game teaching children about the spiritual currents in the draconian fates of life.

The ITC Faith is now much like becoming a "made man" in some kind of Divine Judgment Magnet Club. Like aligning with the Cosmic Forces behind how a tornado always seem to get attracted to the metal in a trailer park.

I hope these two new members never fully realize what they have gotten themselves into now. I really pray for them.

With the ever elevated Ruhi Club I predict that there will be a future top down course on by-the-numbers "Individual Initiative" followed by the UHJ "Encyclopedic Compilation on Common Sense". I also predict a UHJ Bedroom Marriage Manual

will be in the works where the Supreme Body gives advice to everyone on Earth in that aspect of existence too. Maybe Oprah will carry it in her book club. I hear “Position 101″ may be ruthlessly enforced. There may be an entire Ruhi Course on “Position 101″ along with many Feast and Holy Day letters of enforcement to the friends.

So it goes.

Whatever happened to people sticking to their respective spheres in life?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjA_RtsBfAo

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The Concept of Infallibility In The Baha'i Faith

I've put forward my own thinking on the concept of infallibility, or rather, the question of the infallibility of the House of Justice. You can find them here:

Is the Universal House of Justice Infallible?
Is the Universal House of Justice Infallible? part II

Here's a recent message by Sen McGlinn, as part of a discussion on Talisman. Sen's exploration of this concept is much wider than mine but is nevertheless intriguing. Of course, you'll recall that Sen was disenrolled after the publication of his book: Church & State.

****

I think [……] has explained why people want to get hold of something infallible, in the sense of its never being wrong. It is so that they can be not-wrong themselves, it is a way of short-circuiting the critical faculty and banishing doubt and reflection. The inerrancy of scripture in Protestant doctrine is the clearest example: the claim is usually not used as a statement of humility in the face of scripture, but as a claim of superiority: it generally says, "I have the scriptural faith which cannot be wrong, so everyone different is wrong." Infallibility is also an assurance that something will be constant: it is used as a crutch for people who are having difficulty in coping with a world of constant universal change.

Infallibility in the sense of never being wrong is simply a non-existent thing. Arguments about its general nature are therefore futile, and it cannot be proved or disproved in any specific case. What we can say is that, for infallibility in this sense to exist in the world, there would first have to be one universal standard of "rightness" and then one contingent thing or being which somehow escapes contingency and always has and always will be "right" against this one standard. Which standard then? The will of God? Scientific accuracy? effectiveness in maximising human happiness? Effectiveness in some other respect? If there is no universal "rightness" there cannot be anything which is universally and always right.

Infallibility in the Bahai writings does not mean never being wrong. Baha'u'llah for instance was wrong on some historical and scientific matters. Bahai infallibility is in the first place an attribute of God, and as such is shared with the whole creation, and its meaning is defined as "free from sin" that is, not bound by sin, free to do otherwise. Infallibility is a statement that sin does not reign — except when we allow it to. It is an attribute of empowerment, a statement of our liberty from what seems to us to bind us. At every breathe, we are free to start again with a fresh slate. That is why the new believer is assured by Baha'u'llah:

> Thou hast mentioned Husayn. We have attired his temple with the robe of forgiveness and adorned his head with the crown of pardon. … Say: Be not despondent. After the revelation of this blessed verse it is as though thou hast been born anew from thy mother's womb. Say: Thou art free from sin and error. Truly God hath purged thee with the living waters of His utterance in His Most Great Prison.
> (Tablets of Baha'u'llah, p. 76)

This is infallibility at the individual level.

In the same way, sovereignty is an attribute of God, and the individual can choose sovereignty for himself:

> "Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting
> (Baha'u'llah, The Arabic Hidden Words)

Each of the attributes of God takes different forms at different levels. So the kings are called "the manifestations of affluence and power and the daysprings of sovereignty and glory" (Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 30), and in the Aqdas are told: "Arise, and serve Him Who is the Desire of all nations, Who hath created you through a word from Him, and ordained you to be, for all time, the emblems of His sovereignty." At the same time, the founders of religions exhibit a different kind of sovereignty:

> "by sovereignty is meant the all-encompassing, all-pervading power which is inherently exercised by the Q??'im whether or not He appear to the world clothed in the majesty of earthly dominion. … That sovereignty is the spiritual ascendancy which He exerciseth.." (Baha'u'llah, The Kitab-i-Iqan, p.107)

The same is true of infallibility: it takes different forms in the individual, in institutions, in relationships and so on.

> "Know thou that the term 'Infallibility' hath numerous meanings and divers stations. In one sense it is applicable to the One Whom God hath made immune from error. Similarly it is applied to every soul whom God hath guarded against sin, transgression, rebellion, impiety, disbelief and the like. However, the Most Great Infallibility is confined to the One Whose station is immeasurably exalted beyond ordinances or prohibitions and is sanctified from errors and omissions." (Tablets of Baha'u'llah, p. 108).

I will puzzle out the details of this below, but we can note now that it includes "every soul" but not all in the same sense, and that it says NOTHING about not being wrong: it is all about not **doing** wrong. And we can look to the next page and see that the example of the Most Great Infallibility which Baha'u'llah gives is the designation of Mecca as the place of pilgrimmage. Muhammad puts Mecca in place of Jerusalem. He changed the Law of God. "Consider thou the blessed, the divinely-revealed verse in which pilgrimage to the House is enjoined upon everyone. It devolved upon those invested with authority after Him to observe whatever had been prescribed unto them in the Book. Unto no one is given the right to deviate from the laws and ordinances of God…." (There's a critiique here of the Umayyid Caliphs in Damascus, who tried to make Jerusalem at least a rival place of pilgrimmage). So the example of infallibility is that Muhammad changed the place of pilgrimmage, and all after him had to obey that change. Except we do not go to Mecca on pilgrimmage, do we? Baha'u'llah changed the Law again.

It is not just that infallibility means “being always right but only within one dispensation” — which would be nonsensical anyway. It is stronger: infallibility actually MEANS freedom from bondage and therefore the freedom to change. In the case of the Manifestation, it means the freedom not to be bound by the Law of God as it was up till then. In the case of House of Justice, it is bound by what is revealed in the Book, but it is free to change its own rulings. It can say, “sorry, that is wrong” or “that is no longer best” and head off in another direction. The UHJ is not bound by its own history, or by the need to appear consistent to the world. If is FREE, in a way that the Pope is not. He, like the Shaykh al-Azhar and the Shi`ah Mujtahids, dare not be seen to change what the authorities before them have laid down. They are prisoners of history, and of the expectations of the faithful.

I said I would puzzle out the passage from the Ishraqat about infallibility in more detail. In Taherzadeh’s translation of the Ishraqat, a new paragraph begins here:

When the stream of words reached this stage [maqaam, station], the sweet savours of true knowledge ["irfan] were shed abroad and the day-star of divine unity [tawhiid] shone forth above the horizon of His holy utterance. …. Whoso faileth to quaff the choice wine which We have unsealed through the potency of Our Name, the All-Compelling [al-qayyuum – better would be "the Self-Subsisting], shall be unable to discern the splendours of the light of divine unity or to grasp the essential purpose underlying the Scriptures of God, the Lord of heaven and earth, the sovereign Ruler of this world and of the world to come. Such a man shall be accounted among the faithless in the Book of God, the All-Knowing, the All-Informed.

There is no mention here of infallibility, but there is in the following paragraph, and the theme of the oneness of God forms a link. I am inclined therefore to think that it is not the sum of the foregoing Ishraqat, but rather the specific statement that the Manifestation has no partner in the Most Great Infallibility, which gives us "true knowledge.’

Before answering the question, Baha’u’llah explains that he has delayed unveiling the doctrine because it will elicit opposition from the `ulamaa’ and persecution for the faithful. Then he prefaces the actual explanation with a restatement of the sovereignty of the Manifestation, and the threat this represents to existing religions:

> … thou didst firmly adhere unto seemly patience during the days when the Pen was held back from movement and the Tongue hesitated to set forth an explanation regarding the wondrous sign [al-ayah al-`azmii], the Most Great Infallibility [`ismat al-kabrii]. Thou hast asked this Wronged One to remove for thee its veils and coverings … We restrained the Pen for a considerable lapse of time in accordance with divine wisdom [hikmat] and for the sake of protecting the faithful …. The All-Merciful is come invested with power and sovereignty. Through His power the foundations of religions have quaked … Know thou that the term "Infallibility' [`ismat] hath numerous meanings and divers stations [ma`aan shattaa wa maqaamat shattaa = diverse meanings and diverse stations].

The reason why infallibility (in its Bahai meaning) causes the foundations of religions to quake, is that in Bahai teachings infallibility entails change and freedom to change, whereas in previous religions and even in the minds of some Bahais, it is used as a buttress *against* change. (!!) The parallel construction in the last sentence links the diversity in meaning to the different stations or levels at which infallibility applies, as we have seen above. Taherzadeh's translation continues

In one sense it [infallibility] is applicable to the One Whom God hath made immune from error.

"In one sense' does not appear in the text, and the capitalization of One, implying that this is the first station, the most great infallibility of the Manifestation, is an inference by the translator. In my view it is incorrect: this sentence and the following one are talking about the general use of the term, and its Arabic etymology. What it says literally is:

> Where there is one whom God guards (`s.mahu) from slipping (az-zalal), he (God) confers upon him this name (infallible) as a station [fii maqaam].

Baha'u'llah is emphasising that the word `ismat comes from the verb `sm, to guard or protect, and the concept "infallible' means that God has protected someone from something – in the first case, from a slip. Zalal is a simpler term than khataa', it means a lapse, slip or mistake. Coincidentally, this explanation works in English: in-fallible means "saved from falling,' as if God is beside us and catches our elbow when we are about to fall. The English etymology in this case is false, but the coincidence gives us a mnemonic for one meaning of the term.

The text continues, in my translation:

> Similarly where God has guarded anyone from sin (khataa'), rebellion (`isyaan), impiety (`iraaz) disbelief (kufr), joining partners with God (shirk) and the like, God grants each and every one of them the name of "infallibility.'

In short, where God guards anyone from anything, this guarding is called "ismat.

However, the Most Great Infallibility belongs to the One Whose station is a holiness above ordinances and prohibitions and an exemption from sin (khataa') and forgetfulness (nisyaan).] Indeed He is a Light which is not succeeded by darkness and a suitability [s.awaab = rightness, fittingness, perhaps righteousness here?] that is not subject to sin/ failing (khataa'). Were He to pronounce upon water the decree of wine (i.e., that it is forbidden) or upon heaven the decree of earth, or upon light the decree of fire, it is the truth [haqq = truth, reality, legal right] and there is no doubt about it; and it is not for anyone to object to it (or, against him) or to say "why and wherefore?.' If anyone objects, he is one of the objectors in the Book of God, the Lord of the worlds. Truly, he is "He shall not be asked of His doings, but they shall be questioned."

The Qur'an verse (21:23) refers to God, but the subject of this paragraph is the Manifestation of God. The last sentence asserts that the Manifestation is in this respect like God: free to do as he (or she) wills, without having to answer to others. This freedom includes changing laws, of which the extreme example would be to forbid the believers to drink water. It includes changing the language and symbols of the religions, in which, for instance, fire has been the symbol of punishment and disgrace, and light symbolises insight and purity. What is meant by pronouncing the decree of earth upon heaven?

We imagine the physical and metaphorical heavens to be unchanging, while the earth (or the sub-lunar realm in medieval cosmology) is the realm of change, relativity and conditionality. The Manifestation has the authority to introduce change into "heaven" — into religion.

He is come from the invisible heaven (or: the heaven of concealment), and with him the banner `He doeth whatsoever He willeth' and the hosts of power and authority (ikhtiyaar, which is authority in the sense of being able to *choose*) while it is the duty of all besides Him to hold fast to the religious laws (shari`ah) and ordinances (ahkaam) that have been

enjoined upon them. Should anyone transgress them, even to the extent of a single hair, his work will miscarry.

The last sentence need not mean that one who ignores the religious laws will not prosper in this world – the opposite is quite likely. The worst sort of people generally rise to the top. It seems more likely to mean that respect and obedience for the religious laws is a condition for the acceptability of good works in the eyes of God, and for the success of the mystic's efforts.

The Covenant

I decided to write my first entry about the covenant because it is such a central issue in the Baha'i Faith (and we just had our celebration of it in November).In the Baha'i Faith there are two distinct covenants. They are called the greater covenant and the lesser covenant. The former is a general sort of agreement that God will continously send Messengers who will provide us with guidance. (Although it would appear that humanity doesn't really keep its end of the bargain, what with the killing of practically all of the Manifestations of God throughout known history.) And the latter is a specific agreement entered into on one part by Baha'u'llah, whom the Baha'is believe is the latest such Messenger and His followers to be obedient to His laws and instructions and on the other where humanity receives in return unity and harmony.Ofcourse, as any lawyer will tell you, when you make a contract or agreement it is just a matter of time until some schmuck comes along and breaks it. And in the lingo of the Baha'is Faith, those who have not kept their part of the agreement (in other words, they haven't been loyal) are branded "covenant breakers".

Needless to say, the covenant that has been broken in these instances has been the lesser one. That is, a person has acted in a way which was contrary to Baha'u'llah's teachings or instructions. I suppose those responsible for the martyrdom of previous Manifestations would be considered covenant breakers (of the greater variety). Surprisingly the stigma of breaking the lesser covenant is much greater.

It has always fascinated me to see the reaction of other Baha'is to even the words "covenant breaker". Mention of it within a group of Baha'is will tend to lower the temperature a few degrees and sent eyes shifting about the room uncomfortably. Most

Baha'is incorrectly assume that we are forbidden from reading covenant breaker material or books and some Baha'is have so totally misunderstood this whole concept that they have even developed superstitions around it; believing for example, that one will become physically ill if exposed to such text.

This isn't all that surprising when you realize that in this Dispensation there have been bitter power struggles at each transitional period. First, the Bab's appointment of Subhi-Azal as the leader of the Babis in His abscence; creating a long lasting friction between him and his half-brother Baha'u'llah, when the latter declared Himself as Him Whom God Shall Manifest. Then there was the appointment of Abdul'Baha in Baha'u'llah's will as the center of His covenant and the interpreter of His words. This never sat quite well with Abdul'Baha's younger half-brother, Muhammad Ali, who was second in order of succession. And after Abdul'Baha's passing, there was another fallout as quite a few people, with varying motivations questioned the appointment of Shoghi Effendi as the Guardian and even in some cases, openly contested the Will and Testament of Abdu'l-Baha, which gives him that station. Finally, after the passing of the Guardian, there was another tumultous period where some minor factions where created as a result of the claim put forward by the Hand of the Cause of God, Charles Mason Remey, that he was the second Guardian. In each instance, a small group of Baha'is defected and were, as a result, named covenant breakers.

I remember one non-Baha'i friend of mine joking about this abbreviated history, saying that had the Holy Family been around at the time of today's TV talk shows they would be getting advice from Dr. Phil.

Its important to note that in the Baha'i Faith we don't believe in the devil or even hell. Instead of a duality, we believe there is only good in the world because it was created by God who is the embodiment of Perfection and Beauty. To us, anything which lacks such qualities, can be thought of as 'evil' but even then, evil as a metaphysical reality does not exist. Having said that, in the Baha'i folklore, the covenant breaker has somehow supplanted the role of the devil or evil itself. To witness a Baha'is reaction to covenant breakers is akin to witnessing the visceral reaction of a Southern Baptist to the Anti-Christ.

This lore may have its roots in the Writings, where covenant breakers are referred to in the most vitriolic manner. They are even described using the analogies of an illness — such as leprosy or a contagion. I'm personally astounded by Shoghi Effendi's reaction to the death

of Majdi'd-D?n where he figuratively seems to be dancing on a 100 year-old man's grave. I have a very difficult time reconciling this with the repeated instructions in the Writings to love one's enemies. And it is based on these Writings, that Baha'is who otherwise are loving, caring and gentle folk, will actually shun covenant breakers, in effect ostracising them from the Baha'i community.

Ofcourse the paradox that this conceptual framework presents is lost on most Baha'is: if this be God's Cause, how can its light be extinguished? or put another way, if you believe Baha'u'llah is indeed who He says He is, how can any mortal scheme or design damage, deflect or in any way perturp His Cause from its course?

Baha'u'llah says:

> The Hand of Omnipotence hath established His Revelation upon an unassailable, an enduring foundation. Storms of human strife are powerless to undermine its basis, nor will men's fanciful theories succeed in damaging its structure.

Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah complains in Tarazat about Mirza Hadi Dawlat-Abadi's instruction to Babis to refrain from communicating with Him. They were, in effect, shunning Baha'u'llah by not entering into His Presence, nor reading or responding to His letters. Mirza Hadi was a supporter of Mirza Yahya, and had been appointed by him to represent and succeed him. So in effect he was the de facto head of the Azalis or the first group of covenant breakers.

But what really bothers me about all this is the extent to which shunning is applied. Its practice doesn't just extend to the immediate persons cast out, but to their spouses, children, and even grandchildren — unless they explicitly denounce and separate themselves, both physically and spiritually from the offender. This drastic measure rends the loving bonds between families and friends and causes devastation in ordinary lives. It a tragic irony that a Faith which holds as one of its central tenents, unity and harmony would engage such a vicious tool.

A lost point in all this is that the break away groups are so small that they are for all practical purposes insignificant compared to the Baha'i Faith. They number in the hundreds and are in geographically localized communities, while the Baha'i Faith numbers in the millions and is one of the most wide spread world religions today. I don't understand how

the Faith can make such a boogie man out of a handful of people who the vast majority of its people will never meet.

The funny thing about it is that the matter is quite clear cut. I really believe that any Baha'i would easily be able to see that Mason Remey, for example, didn't have a leg to stand on when he attempted to designate himself as the second Guardian. That goes for the other attempts of schisms during the history of the Faith as well. What I don't understand is why Baha'is don't simply inform themselves of the facts and arm themselves with knowledge, instead of reacting with fear and apprehension.

The loaded label of covenant breaker is bandied about quite carelessly and more than not, totally misapplied, by the average Baha'i. It has become a knee jerk reaction to call those who express different opinions on religious matters as covenant breakers or "borderline" covenant breakers (I suppose this is a much easier than actually thinking for themselves or coming up with answers for challenging questions). Yet, this authority does not reside in the hands of just anyone in the Baha'i Faith. In fact, there is a very formal and specific way that a person can be designated as a covenant breaker. Scripturally, the authority resides exclusively with the Hands of the Cause of God (sadly, currently there is only one living Hands of the Cause of God: Dr. Varqa) [Edit: passed away September 22nd, 2007]; who were appointed by the Guardian. During the life of Shoghi Effendi, he chose to remove this authority from the Hands and added it to his own responsabilities. I'm not sure exactly how he justified this or explained it. As far as I know, there is no scriptural evidence to back it up. After his death, this authority was claimed by the Universal House of Justice. Again, I'm not sure how or under what specific scriptural authority this was done.

Having said that, I can actually understand the need of shunning or ostracism when the Faith was young with only a few followers. The idea that at such a tender age it might schism into a multitude of factions and lose its unity and coherence was a valid one. If the provisions had not been made for such a strong reponse at that time, who knows what would have happened. But today, with the success of the Faith, do we still need the same measures of protection? Or are these same measures now innappropriate ?

Perhaps it would help to think about the covenant as it is referred to here by Abdul'Baha:

> O army of God! Through the protection and help vouchsafed by the Blessed Beauty–may my life be a sacrifice to His loved ones–ye must conduct

> yourselves in such a manner that ye may stand out distinguished and brilliant as the sun among other souls.
>
> Should any one of you enter a city, he should become a centre of attraction by reason of his sincerity, his faithfulness and love, his honesty and fidelity, his truthfulness and loving-kindness towards all the peoples of the world, so that the people of that city may cry out and say: `This man is unquestionably a Baha'is, for his manners, his behaviour, his conduct, his morals, his nature, and disposition reflect the attributes of the Baha'iss.'
>
> Not until ye attain this station can ye be said to have been faithful to the Covenant and Testament of God. For He hath, through irrefutable Texts, entered into a binding Covenant with us all, requiring us to act in accordance with His sacred instructions and counsels.

I truly wonder how our reaction, as Baha'is, to the words 'covenant breaker' (or even to our very lives) would be altered, if we kept the above words fresh in our minds.

"The End Is Nigh" – May 21, 2011

In case you were otherwise engaged and were not made aware of this peculiar phenomena, for the past few months, a very small Christian group, lead by Harold Camping has been making a great hue and cry about the impending arrival of judgement day or the rapture on May 21st 2011.

You may not be surprised to learn that this is not Camping's second prophecy. He made a similar claim in 1994. He said he wasn't embarrassed about the previous failure because it was "premature" and regarding the current prophecy he again and again said that it was "guaranteed" and there was no way it wouldn't happen.

The website of the group is now offline but here's a screenshot of their homepage from Google cache:

While Family Radio, the group behind this prophecy is small, their message and the effect they've had has reverberated around the United States and the world. There have been

hundreds of articles and news mentions of the group and its followers. Some of which made arrangements for the end of the world that would mean their lives going forward will be extremely difficult. Many euthanized their pets, used all of their savings to put up print and billboard advertisements to “blow the trumpet” and “warn people”.

Most other people are having fun with this. Here’s a satirical response from a university professor to his students Others organized to have unused clothes placed around town to simulate people being “raptured” out of them and some even asked the believers if they will gift their personal possessions to them (since they won’t be needing them in heaven).

Of course, this is the latest in a very long series of such prophecies.

The most famous one is known as the “Great Disappointment” within the Millerite movement who expected the return of Jesus to earth. That lead to the creation of two other Christian denominations: Latter Day Adventists and Jehova’s Witnesses.

Baha'is of course believe that Miller was off by only a few months and by a literal rather than figurative interpretation of the Bible. Instead of October 1844, the Bab declared a few months earlier on May 23rd 1844 (in Shiraz, Persia instead of the US).

There has been no news officially from Harold Camping so we don't know what his reaction is. But at 89 years of age, I don't think he'll have much more opportunities to make further prophecies and the small group around him will dissolve into obscurity and this event will melt away into the annals of history.

Here's a clip from *Six Feet Under* (mature content) which I thought was apropos:

No related posts.

The Infidel

Omid Djalili, the Iranian-born Baha'i comedian and actor stars in the new UK comedy "The Infidel". In the film Djalili plays a Muslim man who discovers suddenly that he was adopted… from Jewish parents.

Here is the trailer:

They have also started a contest for the "funniest" religion. Here is Omid starting things off with a joke about Palestine:

Let's hear your funniest joke about religion!

The Million+ Book Project

The Million Book Project, an international venture led by Carnegie Mellon University in the United States, Zhejiang University in China, the Indian Institute

of Science in India and the Library at Alexandria in Egypt, has completed the digitization of more than 1.5 million books, which are now available online.

You can access them through this portal.

A search for Baha'i related books brings up a small but interesting list which includes several books by the Hand of the Cause of God, Mason Remey as well as several books in Arabic and Persian.

I'm not a scholar so I don't know if these titles were already available to researchers but at least now they are online and accessible to all equally.

Compared to the vast number of volumes now available online, the collection of Baha'i writings and documents is miniscule. I can't wonder why the Afnan Library, for example, can not be similarly digitized and made available online?

Sure, we have the Baha'i Reference Library, but it is a fraction of the documents and writings being held at the World Center and elsewhere. These writings are the heritage of humanity and with today's technology, there is no reason why they can not be made more widely available.

Not only would this spur on further scholarship from within and outside the Baha'i community, it would assuredly help spread the message of the Baha'i Faith.

No related posts.

The Passion of Mona

There is recent news that the moving story of the martyrdom of Mona Mahmudnizhad (along with 9 other Baha'i women of various ages) will be made into a movie. This amazing turn of events began to take shape when Canadian musician and composer, Jack Lenz, was asked to collaborate with Mel Gibson a few years ago on the musical score of the movie "The Passion of the Christ". Lenz spent more than a year traveling around the world and researching ancient instruments, cultures and their music to come up with an idea of what kind of music would be historically accurate and appropriate for Mel Gibson's magnum opus.It was widely expected that he would be named as composer for the movie

but later on, Mel Gibson and his associates ended up naming John Debney to that role. Nevertheless, Lenz continued to work on the project and ended up contributing to many of the original titles and songs in the movie.

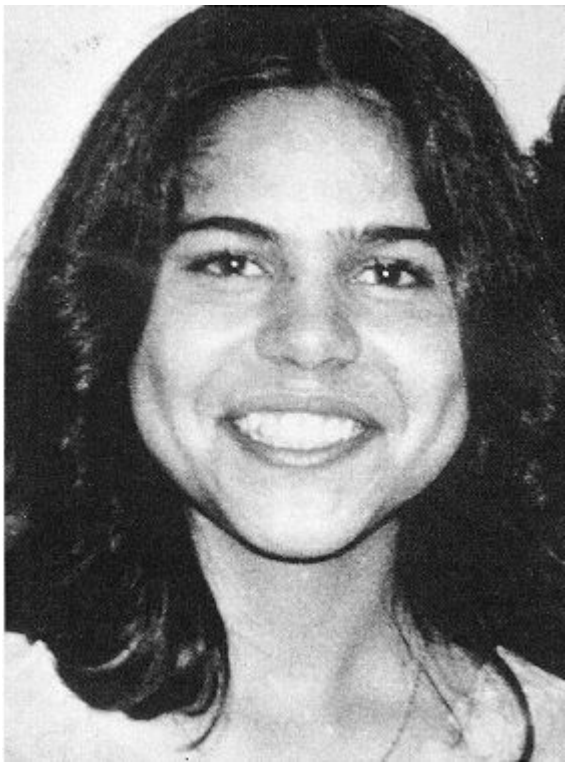
Late last year, Mel Gibson and the other producers of "The Passion of the Christ" met with Jack Lenz in Los Angles. They wanted to communicate their appreciation for the hard work that he had put into the project and asked Lenz how they could return the favour. Jack Lenz replied that it had always been a lifelong dream of his to make an original motion picture about the martyrdom of Mona, a 17 year old Baha'i youth.

He the proceeded to tell Mel Gibson and his associates who were there, about Mona's story; how she had been been taken away by Iranian authorities and interrogated; how she had been told that she would be, along with nine other women, summarily executed; how she had asked to be hung last so that she would be able to pray for the other women; how she had met her death with serenity and strength, never wavering in her faith.

Jack Lenz also showed them a letter that Mona had written herself. One of the producers at the meeting was moved to tears and asked Lenz, "What do you need?" Lenz said, jokingly, "Well, around $10 million ought to do it.". To which came the reply, "Consider it done".

Its being reported that Lenz has now finished a version of the screenplay and submitted it to the producers of "The Passion of the Christ". It is now in their hands. Where it will go and when, if at all, this great story will be told is up to them. I am guardedly optimistic about this project. On the one hand, I know that Mel Gibson and company have oodles of money to throw around after the record shattering success of their movie. But on the other hand, Hollywood is notorious for being a black hole for such worthy projects.

I sincerely hope that sometime in the near future, the whole world will be able to learn about Mona's story, and honor her courage and steadfastness.



Mona Mahmudnizhad (1965-1983)

The Real McCoy

I posted about this a few days ago and made sure that I stressed that I hadn't confirmed the authenticity of that letter. Now, I have, through an impeccable source, confirmation that that letter purported to have been written by the Baha'is of Iran is indeed genuine and was, in fact, written by them.Furthermore, with striking audacity and courage it was not only delivered by individual Iranian Baha'is to the president of the IRI, Khatami, but as well, it was presented to a large number of other lesser governmental representatives in Iran. In the near future, I hope to post an English translation of the contents of that letter. But until then, I will summarize and say that it is a laundry list of oppressive actions which have been perpetrated by the Iranian government and endured by the Baha'i Iranian community. Actions which, as the letter points out, are in direct violation of the current laws and constitution of Iran.

Such a document is indeed historical because it is a startling break from the usual manner of silent forbearance which has up to now marked the history of the Baha'i community in Iran. I can not imagine that the response to it will be adequate by the Iranian regime.

However, if nothing else, it opens a new chapter in the struggle for the Baha'is in Iran to be acknowledged and recognized by the IRI as a separate religion with the right to exist.

The Return of the Hojatieh

With the arrival of the new president, everyone has noted that Iran's political situation has taken a very bad turn. Unfortunately most people don't have even a clue as to the extent nor the underlying reasons. I hope to shed some light in the next paragraphs and once again, show why I believe the UHJ's policy of encouraging Baha'is to remain in Iran is completely wrong and extremely dangerous.

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Within a few months, Ahmadinejad has swiftly reversed years of careful and painstaking transformation by the moderate outgoing president (Khatami). All the efforts of the previous administration to strike a conciliatory note with the West ("dialogue of civilizations") as well as the attempts to inject moderation, flexibility, and democracy within Iranian society have been destroyed. Ahmadinejad has already purged all the most important government posts and appointed his own candidates. The one exception being the most important: the head of the Petroleum Ministry, which the *Majlis* (parliament) has fought tooth and nail – and won. In any case, in all instances where he has been successful, the candidates have shared his particular brand of Islam and were, through and through, fiercely loyal to him and his version of the ideals of the Islamic revolution. As expected, the candidates' competence were of no consequence.

A case in point being the newly appointed president of Tehran University – the first person to occupy the post without having a university education himself. If this pattern of appointing cronies with no competence sounds like another present world leader, wait till you see the other similarities.

Other ominous changes in Iran have occured with blurring speed. Small changes, like the removal of all foreign language signage in airports, as well as large ones; the imposition of a strict dress-code with renewed vigour; extreme limitations on the press and media; and renewed censorship of the arts (movies, music, etc.). On the surface, the intention of Ahmadinejad is to take Iran back to the 'purity' of the first months of the Islamic revolusion under Khomeini.

But what is underlying all these changes? And who is Ahmadinejad anyway? How did someone so unknown, with such little political experience and capital, sweep so quickly to the top at the ballot box?

To answer these questions, we have to go back more than 50 years into Iran's past – back to the establishment of a semi-secret society known as the Hojatieh. They were the fundamentalists, fundamentalists. If you consider Khomeini a loonie case – take him to the nth degree and you may have an inkling about the Hojatieh.

The Hojatieh were mostly made up of the businessmen (*bazaar-i*) and fanatical mullahs. Among other things, they opposed communists, Marxists, and atheists. Their overarching *raison d'?tre*, however, was to prepare the world for the coming of the 12th Imam – the Mehdi. These and other activities were added slowly over time. At the moment of its creation in the 1950′s, however, the Hojatieh had but one singular purpose: the elimination of Baha'is.

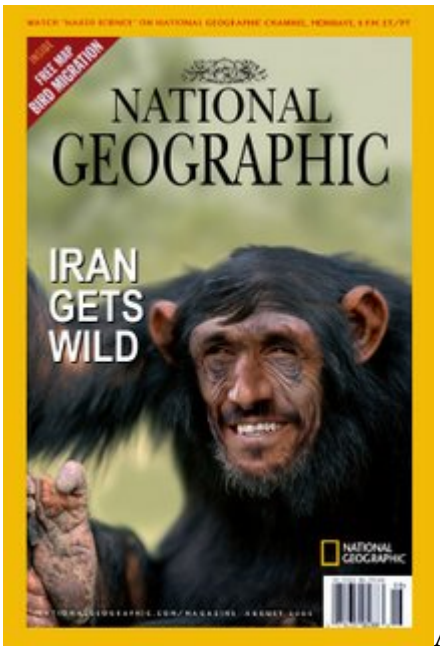
And they carried out their goal with ruthless zeal. From the inception of the organization, countless Baha'is were either killed by them directly or turned in to the authorities, with predictable consequences. They played a very small role in the 1979 revolution and its aftermath – they viciously eliminated the leftist alternative (the Tudeh party) to the Islamic society proposed by Khomeini and they further helped Khomeini by mobilizing their members to vote in the post-revolutionary constitutional referendum. However, immediately afterwards, when their leader refused to accept Khomeini's wacky thesis of *valiat-e-faghih* Khomeini had them disbanded. As you can imagine, a society such as the

Hojatieh doesn't simply vanish. The close ties of its members – cemented by years of mercantile exchange – can not be simply erased. So, they quietly went underground and operated towards their goals – except now with the added characteristic of stealth.

Much like Opus Dei, the Hojatieh lurked like a shadow in the halls of power. Everyone knew they were around, no one talked about it. Recent events prove that the Hojatieh has not only survived its banishment underground all these years but that it has gained strength and crept to the forefront of the political scene in Iran. Indeed, it has boldly come out into the open and is now busily engaged in molding the political destiny of Iran. Ahmadinejad is one of their most visible and devoted members. And through him, most of the upper ranking officials of the current regime are as well.

In the same way that George W. Bush has a spiritual advisor in Billy Graham, Ahmadinejad has Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah-Yazdi (the defacto leader of the Hojatieh). He is known for his extremist views on Islam; he condones and promotes suicide bombings, attacks on civilians in the West and once said, 'if anyone tells you their own interpretation of Islam, punch them in the mouth!'. Recently a cartoonist was jailed and severely beaten when he drew a smiling crocodile – a reference to Mesbah-Yazdi's features.

And much like the Bush administration, Ahmadinejad also demands complete submission and loyalty to his agenda. All high level officials appointed by him have to demonstrate their loyalty by signing documents devoting themselves to the Imam Mehdi – in effect, cementing their Hojatieh identities.



Almost everyone in the West misinterprets the recent extremist speech of Ahmadinejad and blames it on a politically inexperienced man making public gaffes. And surprisingly, in reporting on his speech to the UN, the Western media completely missed the significance of his repeated references to the return of the Mehdi. Most of the audience was dozing off ofcourse, but the fact that the media didn't pick up on this big clue shows just how much the West is ignorant of the true underlying forces in Iran (for Ahmadinejad's surreal personal take on his UN speech see the video link below). Everything Ahmadinejad does in his capacity as president is coloured by his religious ideology. In fact, he has gone as far as re-writing history and saying that the sole purpose of the Islamic revolution was and is to bring about the return of the Imam Mehdi.

The Hojatieh is extremely dangerous because it subscribes to an ideology of apocalypsism. In the same way that Christian fundamentalists expect the Rapture, the return of the Mehdi is awaited by Shi'ite Muslims. They believe that the conditions for the return of the 12th Imam is a sort of end of days scenario. Imagine: war, pestilence, earthquakes, plagues, etc. To them such events are to be welcomed since only when things are downright nasty will the Imam see fit to return. Most shockingly, some ultra fanatics within this camp even go as far as saying that anything one can do to bring about such mayhem is good since it will perhaps speed up his schedule.

If you temporarily subscribe to the ideology of the Hojatieh, suddenly all the puzzle pieces fit together. Would someone who sees the world through this perverse lens be distressed by a runaway drug problem in their country? Not at all. In fact, it would be congruent with their belief system to throw open the border of Afghanistan and let the opium flow freely

into Iran (…with the requisite cut of the proceeds, ofcourse). Would someone with such a belief do anything to address other social ills such as unemployment, prostitution, bribery, graft, corruption, etc.? Again, no. If anything they would take clandestine measures to exacerbate the problems.

To expect Ahmadinejad to be perturbed by the world's reaction to his recent outburst regarding 'wiping Israel off the map', is to be ignorant of his ideology. Upset? Far from it! He relishes the chaos and confusion… the agitation that such actions produce in the West. If he had his way, it would extend and envelop the whole world – so as to hasten the arrival of the Mehdi. In his perverted view of things, the worse things get, the better!

Warning him, chastising him, or threatening him (as the IAEA, the US and Israel have done) is as effective a deterrent as waving a red cloth in front of a bull. Visions of a nuclear holocaust will only bring smiles to his face.

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This is exactly why, more than ever, it is paramount that the Baha'is leave Iran. The gains that the Hojatieh have made in political circles have garnered them a tremendous amount of power. And we'd be foolish to think for a second that they have forgotten the primary reason they were founded more than fifty years ago.

The recent arrests and persecution of Baha'is in Iran are, I'm afraid, only the beginning of a renewed campaign of persecution. Unlike previous administrations in Iran which were reluctantly influenced by international pressure, the perverse ideology to which this one subscribes to allows them to be immune to such forces. Any and all actions taken by the civilized world against the Iranian regime as a consequence of the persecution of Baha'is, will only reinforce the belief system of the Hojatieh and result in their redoubled efforts to sow the seeds of chaos.

I pray that I am completely wrong in my understanding of the situation and wholly ignorant of the real political cross currents in Iran. I pray so because if I am right, many Baha'is are in extreme and imminent danger.

I beg them to get out, for if I am wrong, the consequence is acceptable. They and their families can build a life in one of many civilized countries in the world and simply go back

when Iran's future changes for the better. But if I'm correct, then the consequences of staying in Iran will be tragic.

Related Links:

A recent Channel 4 (British) video story – wait a bit for buffering.

(If you have trouble with the link, you can read the transcript here. Scroll to the bottom where it begins: *"LINDSEY HILSUM, CNN CORRESPONDENT"*)

(Persian) Video clip of Ahmadinejad saying how he was enveloped by light in the UN assembly.

Recent Baha'i World News articles regarding the increase in persecution of Baha'is (which coincides with the rise in power of the Hojatieh): story one, and two.

"Waiting for Rapture in Iran": (By Scott Peterson) Christian Science Monitor

The Mehdi Hotline (another CSM article) and the story behind the story.

excerpt from Debating Muslims by Michael M.J. Fischer and Mehdi Abedi on the Anjoman-e Imam-e Zaman, later renamed Hojjatiyya (The Anti-Baha'i Society)

The Same Dust ?

One of the ideals of the Baha'i Faith which I adore is that each and every human being is equal in the sight of God and that we are really made from the "same dust". As Baha'u'llah beautifully writes in the Arabic Hidden Words:

> O children of men! Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your heart how ye were created.

In the Baha'i Faith we do not have levels or any other sort of category for spirituality; no clergy: no bishops; no cardinals, etc. We are regard each other as, as fingers of one hand, leaves of one tree and drops of one ocean. That's why I have a very tough time with the

following cable from Shoghi Effendi, in which he tells the Baha'is that his brother has recently married a Christian woman:

> Faithless brother Hussein, already abased through dishonorable conduct over period of years followed by association with Covenant-breakers in Holy Land and efforts to undermine Guardian's position, recently further demeaned himself through marriage under obscure circumstances with lowborn Christian girl in Europe. This disgraceful alliance, following four successive marriages by sisters and cousins with three sons of Covenant-breaker denounced repeatedly by "Abdu'l-Bah?? as His enemy, and daughter of notorious political agitator, brands them with infamy greater than any associated with marriages contracted by old Covenant-breakers whether belonging to family of Muhammad-"Al?[illegible] or Bad?[illegible]'u'll??h.

The choice of the words "lowborn" certainly got my attention! As you probably know, Shoghi Effendi was a serious student (some would argue, master) of the English language. He used words as tools and was considered an inspired composer and translator. So, I wonder, why did he choose such loaded words?

I guess I wasn't the only Baha'i who wondered that. Apparently after receiving the cable, the Baha'is of England wrote to the Guardian and inquired what he meant by it. On the surface, the expression "lowborn" seems in contrast with Baha'i values and teachings. It is, however, congruent with the then classist mentality that permeated upper-class English society. Could it be that Shoghi Effendi picked up a little of that from his years at Baliol?

Anyway, in response, the Guardian's secretary writes back:

> Regarding his cable concerning Hussein: he has been very surprised to note that the terms *"low-born Christian girl"* and *"disgraceful alliance"* should arouse any question: it seems to him that the friends should realise it is not befitting for the Guardian's own brother, the grandchild of the Master, an Afn?? n and Aghs??n mentioned in the *Will and Testament* of the Master, and of whom so much was expected because of his relation to the Family of the Prophet, to marry an unknown girl, according to goodness knows what rite, who is not a believer at all. Surely, every Baha'is must realise that the terms low-born and Christian are definitions of a situation and in no way imply any

> condemnation of a person's birth or the religion they belong to as such. We have no snobbery and no religious prejudice in our Faith. But the members of the Master's family have contracted marriages which cannot be considered in any other light than disgraceful, in view of what "Abdu'l-Bah?? wished for them.

I'm even more baffled by this hodge-podge answer, in which the Guardian's secretary seems to dig a deeper hole.

The secretary writes that Shoghi Effendi is "surprised" that the terms he used gave rise to any concerns. This was before political correctness, but why would any Baha'i not question something which appears so contradictory to the teachings and spirit of the Faith? what does 'lowborn' mean anyway? and is it used, as opposed to 'highborn'? was May Maxwell (Shoghi Effendi's wife) 'highborn'?

In any case, the secretary goes on to cite the station of the descendants of Baha'ullah and the Bab. Which, again, totally misses the point. Abdul'Baha, in fact, as the exemplar of the Faith, used the title 'servant of Baha' and considered Himself as an equal to any other person. He helped the poor, fed the hungry, healed the sick. He never considered himself above another person, for any reason. Certainly not because He was the son of Baha'u'llah and Center of the Covenant.

How can we then deduce that His descendants (even farther away from the Blessed Beauty) should in any way believe themselves to be superior to others because of their DNA?

The use of the words "unknown girl", "goodness knows what rite" and "who is not a believer at all" is even more bizarre. Unknown to whom? I'm sure she is known to her acquaintances, family, friends and her new husband. To whom else should she be known to? She certainly seems unknown to Shoghi Effendi as he doesn't even use her name (some would consider that in itself derogatory). Did the Guardian not even inquire who she was? And the melodramatic expression of "goodness knows…" is also silly. The couple would've probably married through Christian or Baha'i rites (or both). That Shoghi Effendi doesn't know by which rite(s) his brother will be getting married alludes to just how little he knew or cared about his own brother's wedding. And the last one ("who is not a believer…") is probably the most shocking. If it is not to hold this against her, why even

mention that she isn't a Baha'i? Since Abdu'l-Baha actually encouraged Baha'is to marry both across racial and religious lines, why would his grandchild's marriage to a Christian girl be "disgraceful"?

The secretary then goes on to say that the words "lowborn" and "Christian" are merely "definitions" of a situation. That's debatable in and of itself because they are used as adjectives. But even if they are simply definitions, they are certainly not objective ones – rather they are used to evoke an emotion and seem to be seeping with bias. And finally the secretary goes out of his way to say that this is not snobbery, nor religious prejudice. A pschychiatrist would have a field day with such a blatant projection but I'll leave that one alone.

All I can understand from this whole incident is that Shoghi Effendi did not personally approve of his brother's choice. Which is fine. Really. But why not just come out and say so without all the convoluted and strained justifications?

Wouldn't that have saved everyone a heap of trouble?

The Situation is Hopeless, But Not Serious

I found this recent post on Baha´i Livejournal to be bittersweet.Bittersweet because it is a situation many Baha´is are well acquainted with. And if you personally aren´t then you are suffering from a rather large concussion or simply haven´t travelled enough within the Baha´i world community.

There are some elements which all Baha´i communities share. From Botswana to Switzerland. From LA to Katmandu. These are that all LSAs are basically disfunctional, the members at each other´s throats, deadlocked. It is worse than any political parliamentary process I have ever seen. Unless you have seen it from upclose, as the poster above describes so tactfully, you can not imagine the vitriol, the emotional blindness and sheer egotism that exists within LSA meetings.

That is not to say that such things don´t exist in NSA meetings (or even UHJ or ITC meetings). But atleast the higher bodies have the ability to use subtlety and hidden

Machiavellian maneuverings behind the scene. LSA meetings on the other hand are analogous to hand to hand combat in the Circus Maximus.

And it isn´t surprising that many people simply decide to "call in sick" and either not show up to the meetings once elected, leaving the quorum to its own devices, or they take precautionary measures by not simply showing up at the strategically important holy day celebrations, social gatherings and feasts just before the annual elections (so as to not be in the "public eye" and therefore not elected) or to withdraw (as the recent example of Momen from the UK illustrates) posthaste from the battle.

Bittersweet because once Baha´is know this to be reality, it may bother them, but at the same time it may explain why entire communities remain stagnant (or even go into decline), why the Faith is seemingly not making any significant inroads in the world and why the life of the general community is so poisonous. Its not pretty, but it is the truth. And maybe its better knowing because its worse living with that question that won´t go away but sits at the back of your mind asking, why are things so crappy? is this what I signed up for? is this the best we can do?

The reason why this sad situation exists is no mystery. The Baha´i election process, as it stands right now is designed so that the same people get elected. The plague of incumbency makes it almost impossible to have a wholesale change in the membership of any LSA, NSA or even the UHJ. Usually what happens is one or two (or maybe three) members change but the vast majority remain as before. In this way, decades can pass with an assembly being primarily composed of the same persons (and having the same persons in the key positions of Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer). Human nature, being what it is, causes camps to develop and polarize into extreme positions.

The solution, interestingly enough has been with us for many years. The most famous instance it was brought to the Baha´i communities attention was when a group of young, idealistic Baha´is in LA in the late 80´s thought they could actually put the Writings into practice and hope to change things for the better. They got together and penned a document which they titled tongue-in-cheek as "A Modest Proposal" (a title used originally by Swift).

For their troubles the authors were raked over coals, publicly denounced on the floor of the US National Convention by a member of the NSA as "worse than covenant-breakers" and

hounded within the Baha´i community, causing many to eventually leave. The Baha´i magazine, Dialogue, which was to publish the document was also forced to close.

What was in that document that was so bad? why were they called "worse than covenant breakers" when they obviously weren´t? why were they accused falsely of distributing a petition? (Falsely because it wasn´t a petition and even if it were, Baha´u´llah, Abdu´l-Baha and the UHJ all have received and graciously answered petitions!)

Well, the document is here for you to peruse. I can´t tell you what to think about it. You´ll have to make up your own mind. I think its called individual investigation of truth, or something like that, isn´t it? (for more info, you might consider Karen´s articles or a simple search on Google.)

I can tell you that part of the document deals with term limits (page six). The simple idea that membership to the different elected institutions should have time limits. Thus allowing for new points of view, fresh ideas and the avoidance of camps or factions within the elected institutions; the avoidance of personality clashes between two or more people which can only become more and more bitter over the years and poison the life of the community. Basically the situation that our friend described so ever tactfully in her post on Livejournal (above).

And interestingly enough this idea is not, as some ignorant Baha´is would claim, against anything in the Writings. But in fact, it is in total harmony with the revealed guidance regarding the institutions. In fact once you read "A Modest Proposal" you will notice that many of the suggestions or "proposals" then called heretic were later implemented by the UHJ, the ITC and the NSA. I´ll leave you to figure out which. And no they do not have the same labels or names as the ones used in "A Modest Proposal" – what? do you take the powers that be to be fools?

Since many of the once heretical suggestions have been already implemented (ofcourse, after their authors were libelled, persecuted and assaulted and different names used for the initiatives they suggested) why not implement another one?

As Watzlawick might say: the situation is hopeless, and the solution is hopelessly simple.

No related posts.

The Song Remains the Same

On March 21st, the Baha'i world community (via the NSAs) elected two individuals to take the place of Douglas Martin and Ian Semple as members of the Universal House of Justice. And just as many had predicted, the newly elected members of the House are both Counselors at the International Teaching Center: Mohajer and Lample.

Here are some biographical information about the members of the House of Justice. Dr. Payman Mohajer is directly related to (the Hand of the Cause of God) Dr. Mohajer – his nephew, I think – and Mr. Paul Lample was a Counselor running the SED efforts at the Baha'i World Centre. I don't know much about Dr. Mohajer but to me the choice of Paul Lample is interesting.

Other than running the SED department, Lample's other achievement was writing the self-published book, "Creating a New Mind"; a book which will no doubt become obligatory reading now. I say self-published by the way because Lample is behind Palabra Publications (palabra is the Spanish word for 'word'); which just happens to be the organization which publishes his book as well as other books. Some of them go by a name you may know: the Ruhi books.

Saints preserve us! What a totally innocent coincidence.

Yes well, this innocent coincidence means that Lample and Arbab are two peas in a pod. One is the creative force behind Ruhi and the other is the publisher. Its pretty safe to predict an intensification of the campaign to Ruhify the Baha'i Faith. In fact they both go way back to FUNDAEC, the foundation started by Arbab in the 70's in Columbia. Here is a rare archival picture of a FUNDAEC class before its mandate was formalized:

‘Dr. Arbab says, touch your head… Carlos, you’re out.’

But if you ask me, the most impressive achievement of Lample (as an ITC member) was coining the phrase that has taken the Baha’i world community by storm: *“What does the pyramid look like in our cluster?”* If you are one of the few who have not used this catch-phrase atleast 3 times in the last cluster meeting, you don’t know what you’re missing. If you insist on a source, fine (top of page 3).

The result of the election of Lample to the UHJ is that we have now one more person at the top who has a personal stake in Ruhi and who will find it extremely difficult to say ‘Hey, we screwed up. Sorry about that. Lets move on now.’ And that means that the Ruhi campaign is probably going to spiral out of control until it crashes and burns of its own volition.

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The trend of electing ITC members to the UHJ was started in 1983. Before then, the majority of the House members were elected from the pool of NSA members. Why is such a change significant? It is an extremely important inflection point in the history of the Baha’i Faith because the UHJ appoints the members of the ITC. With the ‘candidate’ pool for the UHJ also being the ITC members, what we have is a closed loop.

The ITC is appointed by the UHJ, then the members of the UHJ are chosen from the ITC, then the UHJ appoints members of the ITC to replace those newly elected House members. And round and round we go.

It is now obvious, even to the casual observer, that the leadership of the Baha’i Faith is coming from a smaller and smaller group of people with narrower and narrower

viewpoints. Why does this matter? Aren't the NSAs free to elect whomever they wish to elect? No one is forcing them to choose from the male pool of ITC, right?

Well, yes, of course. But the fact remains that they are doing just that. The facts and the trend are undeniable. All we can do is stand back in awe and wonder what is going on. Can it be just a coincidence that the 8 of the 9 members of the UHJ right now are ITC alumni? that 8 out of 9 have been appointees of the House itself? Can it just be coincidence that we have not had one non-ITC person elected the UHJ since 1982 (Mitchell – former member of the NSA of USA)?

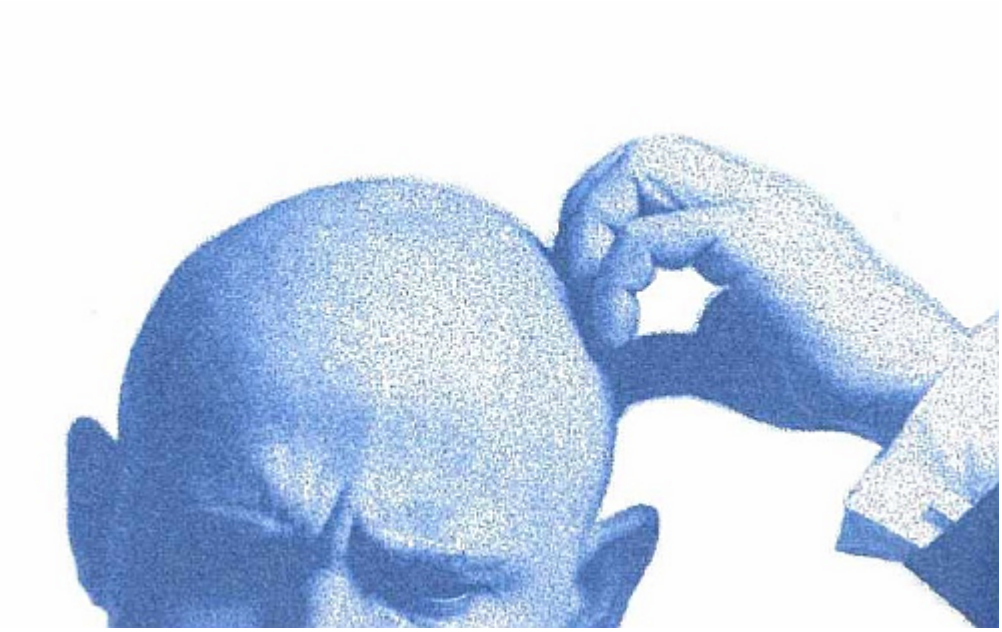
For some Baha'is, the above is something they choose to shrug off. To some others, it is a little blinking red light. Something is very, very wrong here. From a strictly organizational behaviour point of view, what we have here is an organization that has stumbled upon a mechanism which is making it more and more internally-focused, insular and close-minded. And time is showing an acceleration of this trend. The Baha'i administration is being run by a group of people with a very narrow set of opinions and ideas. The deadly disease of group-think, the plague of so many other fine organizations in the past, has officially set in.

Getting back to the question of why this is happening, I can think of some ideas. One, the members of the ITC are very highly visible in the Baha'i world community. Especially at the level of national administration. They are given portfolios (much like the members of the House) and are responsible for geographic areas and countries. They travel often and are in touch with the NSA members of those countries under their watch. Which results in a very powerful, albeit, informal candidacy and implicit campaigning. I'm sure they don't mean to do this but the results are the same nontheless. The various members of the NSAs around the world can't help but see them, hear their speeches, read their letters (with the authority of the ITC) and be effected by their decision making authority.

The other reason is that the appointed arm of the Baha'i administration has, in the past 25 years, become more powerful than the elected arm. And what we have, in effect, are House members who were never elected for office but who have instead a career (some 20+ years) in the appointed arm as Counselors. In effect, the appointed arm of the Baha'i administration is running the whole show. That is not what was envisioned by Abdu'l-Baha when He created the twin institutions, and the two arms of the Baha'i administration.

All I know is if my clusters start to look like pyramids, its time to call a good proctologist.

The Trouble with the World



The topic being discussed currently in various Baha'i forums is a speech given by Peter Khan, on July 3rd 2009 titled "Reflections on the Ridvan Message". You can read the complete speech here.

There isn't much remarkable about it but if you manage to hack through the thick underbrush of verbiage you'll find that almost at the end Khan says:

> The solution is childish simple; the solution is so simple, it [sic] hardly worth mentioning. The solution is no more and no less than unreserved acceptance of whatever the central authority of the Cause, in this case the Universal House of Justice decrees.

Unfortunately Khan doesn't explain what he really means by 'decrees'.

Does that mean anything the House decides? every word they write? every answer they give to a questioner? every letter of guidance to members or national administrative bodies? or does it mean what they decree as in their legislative authority within Baha'i administrative structure?

It would seem that Khan has a wide understanding of ‘decrees’ since he mentions the guidance for ‘direct teaching’, as well as the implementation of Ruhi courses as the only option within the institute process.

This obviously opens up the hornets nest of the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice.

Oy vey! Here we go again.

Brendan wrote a commentary: Second Thoughts on Peter Khan.

Karen is dispassionate.

Alison believes that Khan is overstepping.

As for your humble scribe, I’m not sure what else I can add to what has already been written before here and elsewhere on this topic. I’m not comfortable with the conviction that Khan has in an absolutist understanding of the decrees of the House of Justice and can’t help but think of this gem of a quip:

> The trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt.
> Bertrand Russell

No advancement in any field would be possible if at least one person did not doubt if there was a better way to do things. If one person didn’t doubt the dogma of their day. If one person did not have so much doubt that they investigated other potential answers and avenues.

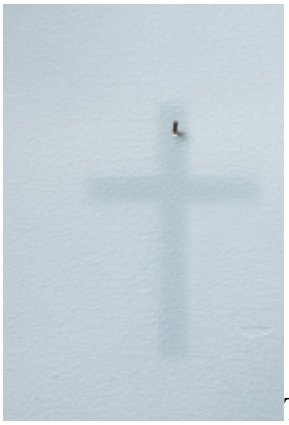
This is true for scientific advancements of course. But it is equally valid in any field of human endeavor.

Do you think that anyone would have believed in the Bab if they first hadn’t a seed of doubt regarding the commonly accepted notion within Islam that Muhammad was the ‘last prophet of God’?

So I respectfully submit to you that believing that we can simply put away questions and do without further investigation of truth is the biggest mistake that Baha’is make.

No related posts.

The Virtue of Atheism

 There's an interesting article in the latest *Wired* magazine: **The Church of the Non-Believers**.

"Look at slavery," he says. We are at a beautiful restaurant in Santa Monica, near the public lots from which Americans – nearly 80 percent of whom believe the Bible is the true word of God, if polls are correct – walk happily down to the beach in various states of undress. "People used to think," Harris says, "that slavery was morally acceptable. The most intelligent, sophisticated people used to accept that you could kidnap whole families, force them to work for you, and sell their children. That looks ridiculous to us today. We're going to look back and be amazed that we approached this asymptote of destructive capacity while allowing ourselves to be balkanized by fantasy. What seems quixotic is quixotic – on this side of a radical change. From the other side, you can't believe it didn't happen earlier. At some point, there is going to be enough pressure that it is just going to be too embarrassing to believe in God."

Complete article.

No related posts.

The Watchword in All Cases is Humility

I was visiting Priscilla's blog and noticed that she hadn't updated in a while. Her last entry is an interesting one.

From the Ridvan 167 (2010) message, the Universal House of Justice writes:

> …we feel compelled to raise a warning: It will be important for all to recognize that the value of engaging in social action and public discourse is not to be judged by the ability to bring enrolments. Though endeavours in these two areas of activity may well effect an increase in the size of the Baha'i community, they are not undertaken for this purpose. Sincerity in this respect is an imperative. Moreover, **care should be exercised to avoid overstating the Baha'i experience** or drawing undue attention to fledging efforts, such as the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, which are best left to mature at their own pace. **The watchword in all cases is humility.** While conveying enthusiasm about their beliefs, the friends should guard against projecting an air of triumphalism, hardly appropriate among themselves, much less in other circumstances.

The bold is my own emphasis. Priscilla's commentary on this is interesting and difficult to refute. She points out that if the community at large erred on the part of pride, triumphalism or 'overstated' the Baha'i experience, then they were only following the tone and words of the Universal House of Justice in their previous letters and messages.

Specifically she points out a triumphant mention of the spectacular growth of the Baha'i community in Guyana in the 1990′s as it reached 6% of the country's population. Subsequently, it declined to 0.1% and it isn't clear if the 6% was accurate to begin with or

if it was, what exactly accounted for the sudden implosion (which – in contrast to the growth – was never brought up or explained by the UHJ).

The commentary is in audio form ~~but there is a technical issue which prevents the file from playing. Hopefully this will be resolved soon and you'll be able to hear her views~~ (technical issue is fixed now):

The above excerpt from the Ridvan message is written within the context of teaching efforts. But it is also true in a general sense as well.

Recently the US NSA had taken the Orthodox Baha'is to court. They lost the original case and then the appeal of that ruling. Last year they were then denied again when they filed for a re-hearing of the trial. The only avenue remaining was to petition the Supreme Court.

The 90 day filing period for such a petition ended last week without it being filed. So it seems that finally, the UHJ and the ITC (and by proxy, the US NSA) is letting this matter rest.

The initial case was without merit and pursuing it was foolish. But listening to Priscilla's commentary made me think. Was the Universal House of Justice being 'humble' when it took a tiny splinter group to court for using the name Baha'i?

Or was it conceited and vain to get so tangled up within the Kingdom of Names? to busy oneself with this trivial earthly detritus and lose sight of the spiritual principles animating the Cause?

How much time and resources were devoted to this petty legal misadventure? how much ego was involved to pursue the matter over 3 years when it was clear as day that there was no basis for it? how much money was devoted to this? what worthy and noble projects were sacrificed in its place?

And why is this not communicated to the community at large? to what end are the legal setbacks and the final failure of the case held from the community? would such secrecy and opacity continue had the result been different and the NSA had won?

These are the questions I ponder.

As well, there is clearly a contradiction at work here. On the one hand, officially, the Baha'i Faith is presented as a united religion; as the only religion which, thanks to the Covenant, has been able to withstand the devastating schisms that afflict other religions. On the other hand, if we for a moment occupy an objective and neutral perch, this legal action is obviously taken by one 'version' of the Baha'i Faith against another.

To be fair, the Baha'i Faith has not shattered into thousands of splinter groups like other religions. There is one main group (usually referred to in academic circles as the Haifan Baha'i Faith) which contains the vast majority of the adherents. Other than this there are only a handful of other groups, each with extremely small adherents (40 or less). But to say, as many Baha'is do, that the Baha'i Faith is unique and united is a falsehood, as this court case and many other facts clearly demonstrate.

No related posts.

The Wayfarer Film

Quest Media has released a film about the Baha'i Faith named "The Wayfarer". You can watch the trailer of the film above and purchase the DVD online.

Perhaps it isn't fair since I haven't seen the full film but judging from the trailer, the film looks to be a piece of puffery. I'd rather see a documentary style film of interviews with people like Juan Cole, William Garlinton, Abbas Amanat, Dann May, Keven Brown, William McCants, Sen McGlinn, etc. If you are familiar with the recent history of the Baha'i Faith, you'll recognize those names. If not, you can find out more about them online.

Such a production might turn out a bit dry but it certainly would be more insightful. It would deal with not just about where the Baha'i Faith has come from and what it is about from but also where it is headed. The problem is that a non-Baha'i would really have to be "plugged in" to do a film like that.

The Wayfarer was done by someone who knew little about the Baha'i Faith and set out to learn the basics by visiting communities around the world. Maybe, just maybe, Jess Firth

and Alexander Hedly will do a follow up which deals with the real Baha'i community and its challenges now that they know the basics.

With thanks to Steve Marshall of BahaisOnline

This Ephemeral World

cartoon credit: Sinfest.net

Those Naughty, Naughty "Baha'i Dissidents"

A few weeks ago, fellow Baha'i blogger J. A. McLean wrote an article titled "Dissidents and the Baha'i Faith". It attracted a lot of attention, especially from quite of few of those naughty, naughty "dissidents".

So much so that Jack seems to have changed his mind about the whole thing and decided to call it all off… by erasing his post from his blog.

Before the self-censorship, the blog post was featured on Baha'is Online. And Allison also wrote a commentary on her own blog. As for this humble blogger, for now I'm withholding any comments.

However, the internet and the technologies it contains allows us to punch a few buttons and take a ride in our own time machine (also known as, Google Cache) to retrieve Jack's original post.

In all its effulgent glory (minus the holy numbered comments), behold:

[START DOCUMENT]

Thursday, August 23, 2007

DISSIDENTS AND THE BAHA'I FAITH

On the Internet today one may find webpages, websites and member lists that contain disgruntled views and/or bitter attacks, usually against the Baha'is Administrative Order, from a relatively small number of so-called dissident and ex-Baha'iss. A dissident is not, of course, an ex-Baha'is, but someone who still claims to be a follower who has serious grievances against the Baha'is Faith and who continues to militate for their acceptance. A dissident must be distinguished from the individual, who for personal reasons, chooses not to associate with the community, and from the person who, for one reason or another, drifts away from the Faith. Surprisingly, some of these attacks are made even by "Baha'iss in good standing."

In the early 1990's, I gained first-hand experience of this phenomenon when I was a temporary member of the original Talisman list, hosted by ex-Baha'is, Dr. Juan Ricardo Cole. I subsequently resigned from Talisman I when Dr. Cole, in his grand design to be the "gadfly" reformer of the Baha'is Faith, made direct, frontal attacks on the Universal House of Justice. What is perhaps not so well-known was that by that time Dr. Cole had been remonstrating with the Universal House of Justice more or less steadily for about 20 years.

It is not the purpose of this message to reanimate the specifics of Cole's case which are well-known to those who once belonged to Talisman I and who are familiar with his articles that attempted to blacken the reputation of the Baha'is Administrative Order. He has since found new enemies: his blog is largely devoted to attacking the foreign policy of the United States government. However, I would like to make some general comments about dissidents and ex-Baha'iss, whether it be Juan Cole, Francesco Ficicchia in German-speaking Europe in the 1980's and "90's, and/or the like-minded Internet club of present or past hostile critics.

The behaviour of these individuals, if one wants to step back and observe it, reveals a negative dynamic or pattern of behaviour that continues to be dismally instructive. I am submitting the following observations, consequently, not to revive some old grudges, nor to perpetuate present ones, but because I seriously doubt that the Baha'is community has seen the end of the complaints of the constantly disgruntled, the doctrinally innovative and the permanently embittered. While space is lacking here to set out fully the entire dynamic of this pattern, I would like to comment briefly on the climate of sympathy that seems to be created, at least momentarily, for the grievances of these individuals.

Allow me to preface these observations with this comment: I do not doubt for a moment that these persons have been hurt or that some have been betrayed by a fellow believer or that some decision by an administrative body has not gone their way. Most Baha'iss, if they live long enough, will experience betrayal, or be subject to an administrative decision that has not been in their favour. The latter phrase applies sometimes to members of these very same institutions. These experiences contribute to our awakening to the stark realities of the human condition.

One of the keys to the sympathetic ear temporarily lent to the disgruntled has to do with the way that organized religion is generally perceived in contemporary society. In modernity, religion and spirituality have gone their separate ways. Individuals may willingly affirm

their theism or spirituality but many disavow being official members of an "organized religion." Of course, the whole notion of being against organized religion per se is a strange one, when one thinks about it. People, generally, do not object to organized government, to an organized judiciary, to organized political parties, to organized education, to organized medicine, clubs, associations and societies. But except for official members, the religious "organization" in a secular age has become definitely suspect.

And for good reason. This climate of suspicion has been created by a long history of the violent repression of doctrinal minorities, and other past or present moral travesties. Uninformed observers, consequently, tend to be predisposed to accept the viewpoint of the dissident without further reflection or investigation. If she has dissented from a religious institution, ergo, the charges must be true and she must be a victim: at least, that is the hasty conclusion. This predisposition was clearly at work for a time in Juan Cole's case, just as it was for another ex-Baha'is, Francesco Ficicchia.

What the dissidents fail to realize, and do not accept, is that the Baha'is Faith, while it allows for a fair and reasonable largesse of individual interpretation, has nonetheless its own doctrinal boundaries and ethical norms. But in the final analysis, these doctrinal boundaries and ethical norms are simply not accepted by these individuals who, driven by frustration at the non-acceptance of the perceived moral rightness of their cause, ego-mania, hyper-individualism and the principles of "liberal democracy," engage in corrosive attacks which by definition are beyond the ethical norms and the principles of consultation which Bah??'u'll??h has mandated to replace acrimonious and divisive debate.

The founders of the Baha'is Faith have repeatedly warned their followers—some individuals even balk at the very notion of a warning–of the grave moral and spiritual consequences that accompany such hostile, confrontational approaches. But these individuals, unless they disaffiliate themselves from the religion to which they belong, and although they have knowingly accepted these doctrinal boundaries and ethical norms, imagine that these standards do not apply to them. They clearly view themselves as belonging to a different category. Dissidents believe somehow that they are fully within their rights to violate these norms with impunity.

Yet, just like the perpetrators who claim to be victims, they act shocked and surprised, and charge betrayal and harassment, when the government of their religion finally asks them to withdraw or takes measures to remove them permanently from the membership list. This

removal, I should add, usually takes place after a lengthy and patient hearing and exchange of views, counselling and, final warnings. This careful process, however, has sometimes resulted in charges of fascism and religious fundamentalism being levelled against the institutions of the Baha'is Faith. Of course, neither Baha'is doctrine nor covenants gives any one a licence to radically alter Baha'is belief or ethical practice to the point of making it unrecognizable to the community itself and to the institutions of the Baha'is Faith. But for these individuals, this seems to be quite beside the point.

As sequitur to this last sentence: the point of this message is not, as might be supposed, simple justification, the basic preoccupation of theology, of administrative sanctions taken against these individuals. Methodologically, the confrontational, heavy-handed approach is also unsound. It is both strange and ironic when this defective, ineffective tool originates with the learned. Phenomenologist of religion, William Brede Kristensen, the Norwegian-Dutch scholar (1867-1953), in his instructive essay "What is Phenomenology?" was perhaps the first to make the point that serious students and scholars of religion must identify with the faith of others to the extent that they "must therefore be able to forget themselves, to be able to surrender themselves to others" (p. 49). The respected comparative religionists, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Huston Smith have since made the same point both in their writings and in their lives by profound study and congenial practice with followers of faiths outside the Christian tradition.

Kristensen is promoting here, not some objective and detached study of a particular religion—let alone an inflammatory one–but rather a process of initiation into the sympathetic understanding of "the faith of other men," as the title of Cantwell Smith’s 1962 comparative study of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Chinese philosophy, Christians and Jews put it. Smith’s innovative little book aimed to elucidate, not only the beliefs of these world religions, but also and especially, how these religions formed the personal values of the men and women who practiced them, and how their personal beliefs motivated their lives. In other words, Cantwell Smith recommended that the observer be willing to be taught by the participants of the tradition he or she was investigating, and to assume their point of view, without necessarily adopting their faith. In the academic study of religion, then, the testimony of believers is consequently the starting point and the meeting place of authentic understanding and must necessarily carry great weight.

Some may think that this argument is irrelevant and has no bearing on the present case; these individuals are, after all, already Baha'iss, and are no longer studying the faith to which they belong. But Kristensen's views are pertinent to this discussion. The point is that with Cole, Ficicchia, and present-day dissenters, the testimony, sacred writings, history and ethical norms of believers were either ignored or distorted to the extent that members of the Baha'is Faith were no longer able to recognize their own religion in the distorted or hostile depictions by these critics. So much for the elementary protocol advocated by Brede Kristensen, Cantwell Smith and Huston Smith and other respected scholars of religion.

What one sometimes reads from these poisoned pens is even more surprising since some of them claimed, or still claim, to be Baha'iss. It is no wonder that the appointed and elected institutions of the Baha'is Faith ultimately came to the intellectually defensible conclusion that they were not. Neither is it a wonder that the Universal House of Justice has written that character, that is, active spirituality, ethics, values and norms, and methodology cannot, and should not, be separated. In this, as in all things Baha'is, character and methodology are one.

***

Posted by J.A. McLean at 11:45 AM 9 comments

[END DOCUMENT]

I was unable to retrieve the nine comments, if anyone has them, please forward them for inclusion.

Thought Experiment

If you are willing to play a little game, I want to try something.

I want you to think back and try to remember all the times you have either read or heard of letters from your National Spiritual Assembly. Ofcourse, you won't recall every single incident but rather try to get an over all idea of what you do remember.

Now, think back and recall how many times they spoke about the financial needs of the Baha'i funds.

And how many times they talked about teaching the Faith.

ok…got it?

Now I want you to try something else.

Cast your thoughts back and recall how many times you have read a letter from your NSA reinforcing the many Writings about charity and the exhortations for the Baha'is to arise and serve their fellow man.

And how many times have you read from your NSA about the importance of helping the needy, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, befriending the marginalized, as Baha'u'llah instructed all Baha'is to do, and as Abdu'l-Baha demonstrated as the perfect exemplar?

ok… Done? Alright.

Now, imagine what sort of community you would have and what sort of effect on the world the Baha'is would have if we inverted the priorities of the NSAs around the world.

Go ahead, play along…its just a thought experiment. Close your eyes for one moment and imagine the kind of community you would see.

That's it. Yup, pretty short thought experiment.

I'll leave it to you to decide if it has any merit.

And if you like, you can leave a little response (even anonymously) in the comments section below to share what your personal thought experiment was like.

Thoughts on the Latest Raids Against BIHE

By now you've no doubt learned about the recent raids on the Baha'i Institute Higher Education by Iranian government authorities. This resulted in the confiscation of teaching materials as well as the arrest of several Baha'is serving as faculty. Sen wrote about this almost immediately after it occurred: Many searches and 14 arrests of BIHE faculty.

In case you're not familiar with the BIHE, it was setup as a result of the systematic persecution of Baha'is in Iran. Part of the organized persecution of the Baha'i community is the Iranian government's explicit policy to exclude Baha'is from the education system. As the BIHE's website explains:

> In 1987, after failed attempts to persuade the government to admit qualified Baha'is students to Iranian universities, the Baha'is community of Iran rallied its forces and expertise and established the Baha'is Institute for Higher Education (BIHE)…. Professors and researchers in Iran who had been discharged from their universities and colleges for no reason other than their membership in the Baha'is faith dedicated themselves to the BIHE project that has evolved from a compensatory institution to a university with academic standards not only on par with the Iranian public university system, but also equaling the standards adopted by universities in the West.

Sadly, this is not the first time that the Iranian government has raided and interfered with the activities of the BIHE. There were similar raids in the 1990′s and again in 2001/2.

Since the malicious intents of the Islamic Republic of Iran is clear, one alternative is to implement a different model. If the BIHE operated as an online education platform instead of an offline, real world decentralized one, it would be much more difficult to curtail. This way there is nothing to confiscate since the servers which contain all the necessary data are in a centralized location outside the purview of the Iranian regime. An example of this model already gaining traction is the Khan Academy.

Baha'i students could use a VPN to tunnel into servers and bypass any Iranian internet security that may prevent them access. This would also prevent hacking/eavesdropping by the authorities. For an extra layer of security the site can be anonymized via an .onion TLD (and accessed via TOR). Yes, there's more to the internet than just http: IRC, torrents, usenet, etc. There is a whole darknet out there.

Of course, not all disciplines being taught at the BIHE will be compatible with an online teaching format, however many will. As well, the added advantage is that students can take courses even if they are geographically isolated.

Even if implemented, such countermeasures run headlong into Iran's recent plans to close their internet off completely. Currently, as with many other countries in the Middle East, Iran has restricted access to thousands of sites. Many of these are popular ones you may use without a second thought everyday (twitter, youtube, facebook, etc.). But that doesn't mean that Iranians can't get around the restrictions.

In fact, ways to circumvent the Islamic firewall are well known. Just recently, Houshang Fanaian, a Baha'i living in Iran was sentenced to 4 years in prison for his activities on facebook. Ironically, Iran is putting in place such monitoring and censorship with the software and hardware sold to it by US companies such as Secure Computing Corp., Juniper Networks, and Fortinet.

As if by coincidence, just as news arrives of Iran's intentions to heavily restrict internet access, a report from the United Nations declares unfettered and universal access to the internet a human right:

> Given that access to basic commodities such as electricity remains difficult in many developing States, the Special Rapporteur is acutely aware that universal access to the Internet for all individuals worldwide cannot be achieved instantly.
>
> However, the Special Rapporteur reminds all States of their positive obligation to promote or to facilitate the enjoyment of the right to freedom of expression and the means necessary to exercise this right, including the Internet.
>
> Hence, States should adopt effective and concrete policies and strategies –- developed in consultation with individuals from all segments of society, including the private sector as well as relevant Government ministries -– to make the Internet widely available, accessible and affordable to all

Obviously if Iran is successful in isolating itself and forming its own massive 'intranet' instead of being connected to the same internet that you and I use, the countermeasures suggested above for the BIHE are useless.

Another obstacle is the cost of internet access in Iran. If you are connecting to an online site to learn via video and other rich content, you will need a high speed ADSL (or equivalent) connection. That is rather expensive in Iran. A 2 Mb connection costs the equivalent of $400 US per month. In Europe or North America the cost is less than a tenth of that.

Ultimately, the best of the worst options is for young Baha'is in Iran to leave and pursue productive and happy lives elsewhere. The continuing human rights abuses of the IRI regime will not stop and attempts to adapt and survive will in the end be nothing more than a cat and mouse game leaving the community harried and exhausted.

There are many countries that would be happy to provide a new home to Baha'is. Many are taking the offer and saying "Farewell to Iran" every day. To the young Baha'is in Iran that are able to leave but may be reluctant because of feelings of doubt about the West or perhaps due to nationalistic loyalty I'd like to remind Baha'u'llah's words:

> Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind.

Three Baha'is Jailed in Iran

In May 2006 a group of more than 50 Baha'is were arrested in Shiraz. Most of them were released almost immediately with the last remaining individuals freed temporarily pending their court hearing.

The majority have gotten a suspended sentence but three Baha'is: Haleh Rouhi Jahromi (29), Sasan Taqva (33), & Raha Sabet Sarvestani (32) have been sentenced to four years in prison.

haleh-rouhi-sasan-taqva-raha-sabet-bahais-shiraz-prison

The official charges are "organizing illegal groups" which garnered them 3 years each and "propaganda against the regime" for which they received a one year prison term. The 51 other Baha'is were found guilty of "offenses relating to state security".

The vast majority were released less than a week after being arrested while the three individuals sentenced to prison were detained for one month. The good news is that all of the Baha'is involved remain free pending a filed appeal.

The group of Baha'is were involved in what is described by official Baha'i sources as a "social and economic development project". Diane Ala'i, the Baha'i UN representative says the Baha'is were "engaged in an effort to help underprivileged children in their city, through a program of training that emphasizes moral virtues."

Although I could be wrong, that sounds like Ruhi. It is being reported that the Baha'is started the project only after receiving permission and approval from the Iranian authorities. But the Iranian powerbase being the splintered and schizophrenic monstrosity that it is, they were soon after arrested for the same activities.

Amnesty International has issued an Urgent Action request for letters regarding the release of these prisoners of conscience. The official Baha'i institutions welcome the attention of Amnesty International.

I imagine if enough diplomatic pressure and media attention is brought to bear on the Iranian regime it will do away with this charade and let all the Baha'is go free. For those

who are not familiar with the situation: the Iranian regime not only doesn't recognize the Baha'i Faith it perceives it as an affront to be destroyed.

My heart goes out to these three as well as all Baha'is still in Iran. I beg my brothers and sisters to come and join the rest of us in the civilized world. The Iranian regime will crumble and fall of its own accord and in its own time. By then you can have a great life and can always return to the Cradle of the Faith. Don't throw away the beautiful lives that you could have by living in a free and democratic society that welcomes you and appreciates you.

I would like to humbly request your thoughts and prayers of support and love for the above mentioned Baha'is and their families.

Namaskar

Here is an English translation of a letter written by Sasan's family:

O God, what can I write? Who can I write to? What recourse have I? I have no one but you, I have no helper except you. I am helpless in every way. All I have is to seek your protection, to beg for your help. You are my helper. You are the All-Knowing and are aware of what is in every heart. By your own Lordship, ordain whatever you know to be best for these dear prisoners whose only crime has been serving the human race and those who are in need. I am a father who rises early every morning and with a hopeful heart, goes to visit the holy places to pray for the safety and release of these precious prisoners and to pray for all of humanity. I beg Him to grant perseverance to my family and I and to all other families who have loved ones that have been imprisoned for the crime of serving humanity. I beg Him to grant these loved ones strength and perseverance to get through this divine test with pride. O God, as I write this letter, my son's picture is before me and I am thinking of what two other families, like me, are going through and how concerned they must be for their loved ones. What can we do? We must be content with the good-pleasure of God. Let me say a few words about my son, Sasan. According to everyone, he was one of the most lovable individuals in this community, always sharing in the joys and sorrows of others, a friend and mentor to other youth his age, and always eager to help others in their time of need in any way possible.

It's me. A mother. A mother to who God gave three children, Sasan being my oldest son. I want to write about the day that God gave me Sasan. Before Sasan was born, two of my

previous children had died of illnesses. The day Sasan was born, I placed him in the care of God. When his uncle read the verse (the prayer that is recited into the ears of newborn babies) into Sasan's ear, I made an oath to raise him in such a way that he will follow only the right path. After Sasan, God gave me two daughters who I raised in the same way. Ever since he was a child, Sasan was a lovable boy. In the early years of the revolution, when they expelled all the children from school, Sasan was likewise expelled. His teachers loved him so much that they wept for him. As he grew older, the love and attraction those around him had for him increased. He grew more sincere, more selfless. Every night, well into the late hours, he would serve and look after the youth his age and others in the community with the most tender-care.

I would sit at home waiting for him to return, counting the minutes. As soon as I heard the door, I would warm up his food. How many a night did I stay up late waiting for him to put his key in the door and say, "Mom, Dad, I'm home.' Its now 16 days that my son has been sitting alone in the corner of a prison cell in these autumn nights while his father, sister and I wait eagerly for him to return. Lord, are service, being kind, and caring for others a crime? Do his father and I deserve in our old age to sit in anticipation of him to return to us? Every day, we count the seconds until Tuesday when we can see our son for 4-5 minutes from behind a glass. God, at this age, I long to see my son wearing a tuxedo, but alas, he is wearing a prison uniform—a uniform with the scales of justice on it, but alas, these are the scales of injustice, not justice. O God, hear my cry for help and release my son. Bring back those nights when I would stay up late eagerly waiting for him for return.

We are Sasan's sisters, one 3 years younger and the other 6 years younger than him. However, neither our age difference—nor even our gender difference—has ever posed an obstacle in our relationship with Sasan. Each of us loves Sasan in her own special way. I am the older sister. Prior to my marriage, Sasan would help me in every way and take care of me. After my marriage, he would continue to help me in every way as before. He loves my husband like a brother. He does everything in his power for me. If I were to write about it all, this letter would become too long. I will hand the pen over to my younger sister, who misses him more than anyone else these days. She also performed some of the same services that Sasan was rendering.

I am the younger sister. I was also imprisoned for a week and know the kind of place that prison is. God only knows how close I am to Sasan. If I ever sensed that Sasan was sad or

upset, I too became upset. I wouldn't sleep at night until Sasan returned home. I'd call him more than three times a day on his phone. But, it has now been some time since we heard his voice, his laughter, his jokes here at home. At night, I sit and wait hoping that he will return at some late hour. But when I see his picture, I remember that he is in prison because of his convictions, because of his country, because of his countrymen. I sometimes cry, I cry from missing him, but I also yearn, I yearn for the innocent youth who are imprisoned for their country. God help me because I feel that the load of responsibility that Sasan had taken on his shoulders is now being placed on mine since my older sister is married and lives far from us. Lord, grant patience to my father and mother so they may witness their children's success with their own eyes. O God, every day, I stretch out my arms to you and pray to you to administer justice to them. Be their shield and protector. As I write these words, my mother has been staring at Sasan's picture. She says nothing. My father recites prayers under his breath. Whatever you have decreed Lord is certainly what is best. Have mercy on these three families and grant them strength and perseverance.

Time for Ruhi to Show Us the Money: Part I

Before I can explain why it is time for Ruhi to "show us the money" (by which, I mean *results*), allow me a slight digression into the fields of anthropology and sociology. With your indulgence the connection to Ruhi will be shortly obvious.

A few years before Arbab began to work on Ruhi and FUNDAEC, a Dutch gentleman by the name of Geert Hofstede, was working on a large project for IBM. Within the human resource department of IBM, Hofstede's main task was to travel the world and to gather information on how the different branches of IBM in different countries worked in order to glean lessons of best practices. While engaged in this work, he stumbled onto a framework for assessing culture. In essence, the data staring back at him started to form itself into patterns. Very soon, what the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator was to individual personalities, Hofstede's Dimensions were to collective personalities – otherwise called, culture.

Technically there are 5 axes but for our purposes we need only explore 3 of them. If you would like to find out more, you can check out Hofstede's own website, wikipedia or your friendly, neighborhood sociologist or anthropologist. In any case, the three axes or dimensions relevant to our discussion are:

1. **Power Distance Index (PDI)** that is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions accept and expect that power be distributed unequally. Low power distance (e.g. New Zealand) expect and accept power relations that are more consultative or democratic. People relate to one another more as equals regardless of formal positions. Subordinates are more comfortable with and demand the right to contribute to and critique the decision making of those in power. In High power distance countries (e.g. Malaysia), less powerful accept power relations that are more autocratic and paternalistic. Subordinates acknowledge the power of others simply based on where they are situated in certain formal, hierarchical positions. As such, the Power Distance Index Hofstede defines does not reflect an objective difference in power distribution, but rather the way people perceive power differences.
2. **Individualism (IDV)** on the one side versus its opposite, collectivism, that is the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. On the individualist side we find societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family. On the collectivist side, we find societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often extended families (with uncles, aunts and grandparents) which continue protecting them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.
3. **Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)** deals with a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity; it ultimately refers to man's search for Truth. It indicates to what

extent a culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations. Unstructured situations are novel, unknown, surprising, different from usual. Uncertainty avoiding cultures try to minimize the possibility of such situations by strict laws and rules, safety and security measures, and on the philosophical and religious level by a belief in absolute Truth; 'there can only be one Truth and we have it'. People in uncertainty avoiding countries are also more emotional, and motivated by inner nervous energy. The opposite type, uncertainty accepting cultures, are more tolerant of opinions different from what they are used to; they try to have as few rules as possible, and on the philosophical and religious level they are relativist and allow many currents to flow side by side. People within these cultures are more phlegmatic and contemplative, and not expected by their environment to express emotions.

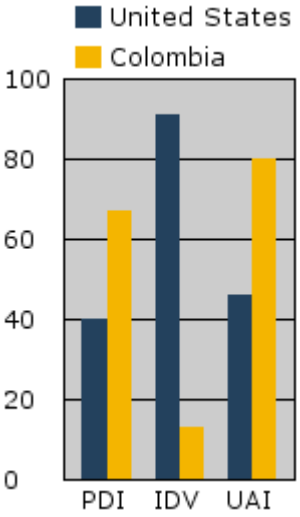
Now, let us assess the culture of Colombia, the country that Arbab found himself in, half-way around the world from Hofstede, as he was busy putting the finishing touches on his soon to be famous framework. The highest Hofstede Dimension for Colombia is Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) at 80. This means that as a society, Colombia has a very low level of tolerance for uncertainty. It is a culture where people strongly prefer to have things spelled out clearly. They are comfortable and seek out absolutes and recoil from unstructured situations or "grey" areas, whether that is from a philosophical, religious or practical stand point. Their ultimate aim is to control life and to eliminate or avoid the unexpected. Colombians know exactly what they believe and they have little tolerance for other ideas or theories.

According to Hofstede, Colombians have a rather high tolerance for power inequality. Their PDI score is 67 – this means not that there is inequality, but that people are comfortable with the idea of stratification in society. Those with higher rank are used to perks and people with lower rank know their place. This is a culture where there is a strong sense of hierarchy and formality.

Finally, Colombia has a very low Individualism (IDV) score: 13. This is not the lowest in the world but there are only 4 other countries (out of the 56 in the Hofstede database) with lower IDV scores; and they are all Latin American countries as well. This score means that the country prefers collectivism compared to individualism. Colombians identify themselves as members of a group, family, extended family, etc. They are loyal as this

quality over-rides the majority of other societal values. This society functions by the unwritten rule that through strong relationships, people take care of each other.

By now gears will have been turning in your head as you put the pieces together. Whether Arbab realized it or not, the Ruhi course is perfectly molded to fit the cultural norms of Colombia! They prefer to have things in black and white; so filling in the blank with only one possible answer is ideal. They are comfortable with hierarchy and rank, so having a tutor lead the class through a sequence of courses makes perfect sense. And joining a group study circle (rather than individual study) again fits perfectly because culturally, they identify with groups and are happy to conform and subjugate their individuality.



Obviously by now you are aware of the criticisms leveled at Ruhi. For now, let us ignore the well deserved critiques which point to the vast number of errors within the course. Let's simply compare the culture of Colombia and the USA to see if it can explain why Baha'is in the US are chaffing at the pressure to take Ruhi courses.

Even a cursory glance tells us what we intuitively knew. These are vastly different cultures! If we tried, we could find two that were less alike but what would be the point? The culture of the US is very individualistic with a IDV score of 90. People are self-reliant, automonous; they want to be "their own man" (or woman).

The PDI for the US is low at 40 (the world average is 55). This means that Americans do not like authority, they prefer to live on equal footing with others; their ideal is a consultative or democratic society with few hierarchies or rank. And finally, the UAI score is low at 46. This means that US citizens are comfortable and prefer few rules. In contrast to Colombians, they are perfectly at ease in a situation where the outcome is unknown or unexpected. They thrive in the "grey" areas of life. There are only 6 other countries (out of

56) which have a lower UAI score. Culturally, Americans are tolerant of a variety of beliefs and ideas and do not feel the need to impose their own views on others.

Now, I have to inject a caveat. This is a scientific model to describe cultures. It should not be mistaken as being deterministic. There are always individuals within cultures that do not adhere to the norms (just ask George W. Bush about imposing his views on others) but the purpose of such broad strokes is to generalize accurately about the overall character of a specific culture.

This framework explains what we've already seen across the world-wide Baha'i community as Latin American Baha'is love Ruhi, while North American and European Baha'is are largely ignoring it. It is no wonder then, that the Ruhi course was so successful as it grew from the small Cauca valley north of Cali to nearby villages, then surrounding cities, and finally whole new regions of Colombia.

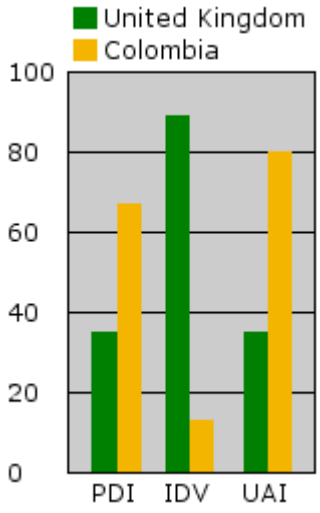
Or, was it?

I'll explore that in Part II

Time for Ruhi to Show Us the Money: Part II

This is the second installment asking why the Baha'i Ruhi courses should "show us the money". If you missed the first part, then click on the previous link to go back and read it. You can skip it but doing so would be like walking into an LSA meeting; it'll only leave you confused and unsatisfied.

While Ruhi is attuned to the cultural norms of Colombia, either by design or accident, that does not guarantee or prove that it is a success. That is, proving or showing that there was an inherent fit between the structure or style of the course and the country in which it was first implemented is one thing, showing that it was a success in that country is another matter.



By the way, the culture that Arbab himself was most familiar with and attuned to, Iran, bears a striking resemblance to that of Colombia. And I'm sure that throughout the process of development, the Ruhi course was in turn molded and shaped into what it is by the very fact that the feedback was coming from Colombians (and not, say, from the UK). So although, initially, it may have had a loose shape, over the many iterations and refinements it underwent, Ruhi progressively came to more and more resemble its environment. And to summarize from Part I, these were: a preference for black and white absolutes (rather than greys), group or collective organization (rather than individuals) and hierarchical (rather than egalitarian) structures.

So under such idyllic conditions: having the full support of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Colombia and the Universal House of Justice (along with the ITC), having sufficient financial backing – provided by the institutions – to initiate the project and to refine it iteratively, having a long gestation and maturation to perfect the courses, having a complementary style to the culture of Columbia, **was Ruhi successful?**

And by this I don't mean did very many Baha'is in Colombia participate in Ruhi courses, but did Ruhi deliver results? In other words, **did Ruhi increase the size of the Colombian Baha'i community?** After all, this is why it was created.

If that is news to you, let me pause to explain. The Baha'i community had seen, randomly scattered, large scale conversions before. The challenge was that although a great multitude would enter after a successful teaching campaign, within a short period of time they would drift away or become inactive. Ruhi was created as a systematic method by which human resources could be developed to deepen these new believers and involve them in community life and then, eventually, to engage in another round of teaching campaigns. And so on and so on. This is what "exploiting the framework for action" means. This is what the now common catchphrase "intensive programmes of growth" or IPG means. After all, you can't have IPG without the G or growth.

But even so, questioning the efficacy of Ruhi at first may seem silly. After all, we all know that Ruhi has expanded beyond Colombia and is now implemented in all Baha'i communities around the world. And yet, the question remains, petulantly tapping its feet, waiting to be answered. It reminds me of the introspection undertaken by Willow Creek Church (thanks to Steve for bringing it to our attention through BahaisOnline):

> "Participation is a big deal. We believe the more people participating in these sets of activities, with higher levels of frequency, it will produce disciples of Christ." This has been Willow's philosophy of ministry in a nutshell. The church creates programs/activities. People participate in these activities. The outcome is spiritual maturity. In a moment of stinging honesty Hawkins says, "I know it might sound crazy but that's how we do it in churches. We measure levels of participation."
>
> Having put so many of their eggs into the program-driven church basket, you can understand their shock when the research revealed that "Increasing levels of participation in these sets of activities does NOT predict whether someone's becoming more of a disciple of Christ. It does NOT predict whether they love God more or they love people more."
>
> Having spent thirty years creating and promoting a multi-million dollar organization driven by programs and measuring participation, and convincing

> other church leaders to do the same, you can see why Hybels called this research "the wake-up call" of his adult life.

A qualitative study such as the one Willow Creek undertook is challenging because it measured factors that aren't easily quantified. But a study of the efficacy of Ruhi in promoting numerical growth would be rather simple. For example, what if we compared the communities in Colombia that were doing Ruhi in the 1970's and 1980's to those in surrounding Latin American countries that hadn't yet done Ruhi? Such a study would, more or less, isolate Ruhi as the only factor while keeping the same time, culture, economic development, etc.

If we feel extra adventurous, why not look at not just quantitative results but also qualitative ones? After all, if Ruhi can and did improve the quality of our communities, then eventually, those communities would be much more attractive to seekers and as a corollary, they would experience numerical expansion.

So where is our very own survey to find out if Ruhi was a success in Colombia?

As far as I know there hasn't been any. Although we seem to have become enamored with statistics, keeping track of how many people are taking Ruhi 1 vs. Ruhi 2 or how many A or B or C clusters there are, etc. Similar to Willow Creek's old approach, all the statistical activity is bent on monitoring the uptake of the Ruhi program, not about its efficacy. And that should be alarming to all Baha'is.

But the feedback is there, in the numbers, if you look carefully. After all, positive results can not hide for long.

Think about it: we're talking about a sequence of courses, implemented with the full backing of the institutions, in the most fertile environment, for over **forty years**. Read that again. Ruhi is 40 years old. The exact birth date is nebulous but it is most often cited as being started in late 1960's and early 1970's. What that means is that teenagers that were in the first, rudimentary, Ruhi study circles organized by Arbab are now well into middle age. Forty years is two generations!

So, what has Ruhi done for the Colombian Baha'i community after more than 40 years of continuous application?

That is, I think everyone will agree, a fair question to ask. Nowhere else is Ruhi so well suited, nowhere else has Ruhi so much continuous experience, nowhere else has Ruhi undergone so much development than in Colombia.

Has Ruhi set Colombia ablaze with the fire of the Baha'i Faith?

Has Ruhi, after 40+ years, instigated and fueled "entry by troops" in Colombia?

Has Ruhi attracted new believers, swelling the rank of Baha'is in Colombia?

Has Ruhi then deepened these new believers, retaining them and propelling the Colombian Baha'i community ever forward?

Has Ruhi cut a swath through the social fabric of Colombia as easily as a Jewish mother through self-esteem?

If anyone can show that after 40+ years there is an avalanche of results that makes Ruhi irrefutably the success that it is trumped up to be to the rest of the world; then all criticism will be swept aside with one fell swoop.

This should be an incredibly easy task. And it would silence, if not all critics of the Ruhi approach, then most certainly this one. Who dare argue with results? Who dare question or criticize the method when it has brought clear success? Who dare suggest cutting down the tree that yields such goodly fruit? Not I.

Extra credits go to those that can not only provide Baha'i sourced data that shows an explosion of growth in the Baha'i community of Colombia but also confirmation through third-party sources such as government census data or university research reports, etc.

I've searched high and low but have not found any such data. This is why I'm putting out an *All Points Bulletin* (APB). This is the intertubes and they wind their way into all sorts of places. If you are reading this and know of such data or where it can be found, then please drop a comment below and enlighten us all. If any Baha'i is reading this from South America or dare I say it? Colombia… then please make gentle inquiries to your NSA or provide letters, year end reports, or whatever official documentation you can to shut up the critics of Ruhi for good.

Please note that I'm being extremely gentle in this regard because had there been such success, all Baha'is would have heard about it in great detail. And yet, I look forward to being proven wrong because then it will afford me the opportunity to learn something.

If, after 40 plus years of gestation and maturation, through continuous implementation and iterative development and perfection; with a program structure incredibly attuned to and complementary to the culture of its host environment; with the full financial, moral and administrative support of the Baha'i institutions; if with all these advantages, Ruhi can not provide significant results that prove its efficacy beyond a doubt in its native country of Colombia… then by what rationale should we expect it to suddenly start to succeed now? and especially in other, much more hostile cultures?

The next step would be clear:

> Trees that yield no fruit have been and will ever be for the fire.
> – Baha'u'llah (Persian Hidden Words)

Towards a New Economic System

The global financial crisis is abated and while most are glad to see it drop from the top spot in the media, there is still a danger that the underlying reasons why it occurred have not been resolved.

As Sonja asked last year, what would the Baha'i answer have been? Of course, the Baha'i Faith does not pretend to be an economic system. It neither endorses a *laissez-faire* economic system, nor a Marxist, socialist or communist system.

The world is by now becoming keenly aware that none of the frameworks implemented throughout history have been successful. The failures of Marxism and communism provided the right with a few decades to gloat. However, the recent collapse of the world economy is a sharp slap in the face of the Chicago school of thought.

Understandably, everyone is confused. Experts, economists, and politicians argue incessantly about what happened and why and what should be done. As always, there are a few who tenaciously cling to the old, fatal ideas, claiming that they are valid but their

implementation was flawed. This is the tired refrain we've heard so many times from the left to excuse the collapse of communist states. And so it is equally invalid.

People are angry. The gap between the rich and the poor has reached epic proportions not seen for more than 80 years. Michael Moore who has his finger on the pulse of the masses has captured the zeitgeist yet again and released a scathing new documentary: "Capitalism, a Love Story". Here is the trailer:

Being the *agent provocateur* that he is, Michael Moore doesn't pretend to offer answers in this documentary. Instead, he exposes a broken system by asking a lot of daring questions. One of his main ones is that both capitalism and socialism are constructs 100′s of years old. We are now living in the 21st century – isn't it time we created a new financial system for today's world?

And most damning of all: how can we pretend to live in a political democracy when our economy is not democratic? Can we ever have true democracy when the top 5% of Western society control the majority of its wealth? When that top 5% uses money to influence politics to protect the *status quo*?

Of course, answering these questions and proposing new paths for humanity is complex and will take time. But if you look carefully, even right now, amid all the chaos and injustice, there are a few glimmers of hope. One that I learned about recently is a micro-credit project being spearheaded by a Baha'i NGO in South America. They are working with the locals to set up self-sustaining banking institutions, run democratically by the community, for the community. While these tiny micro-credit institutions have a Baha'i model built in, the vast majority of the members and participants are non-Baha'is.

The work they are doing is amazingly good as you can see from this documentary. It is a bit long at 40 minutes but well worth it. I encourage you to watch it. If you can't in one sitting, come back and see it in two or three installments. And make sure you share it with your friends. It is life affirming and during difficult times like these, it is important to be reminded of the good in the world:

I'm not suggesting that these simple community based finance institutions are the panacea for an incredibly complex and interwoven global financial marketplace. But the underlying

philosophy is what is important. Had the animating spirit behind these micro-credit institutions also powered Wall Street, we would not have gone through the wrenching financial crisis.

Tragic News From the Haaritz Newspaper

The world wide Baha'i community was saddened to hear the tragic news that all of the members of the Universal House of Justice died after their Gulfstream IV jet crashed on its way as it returned from Aruba.

The Haaritz

Sunday, April 1st, 2007

Tragedy Befalls Baha'i Faith

The world wide Baha'i community was saddened to hear the tragic news that all of the members of the Universal House of Justice died after their Gulfstream IV jet crashed on its way as it returned from Aruba.

Investigations are, as yet, inconclusive regarding the cause but the authorities are confident once the black box is retrieved it will shed light on this tragedy. As many of our readers know, the Universal House of Justice is the governing body of the Baha'i Faith which is headquartered in Haifa, Israel on Mount Carmel. The Universal House of Justice is elected from and by all Baha'i adults in a four year cycle. The nine men were returning from a celebratory jaunt after they being elected for the 6th consecutive time, just two weeks ago.

Mr. Holden McGroin, the representative of the Baha'i World Center, was reached for comment and expressed his saddness at this most tragic loss. "We are overwhelmed with grief. There are outporings of sympathy from heads of state, dignitaries and just now I heard that Bono is redirecting U2's tour to be able to come to Haifa and lay a wreath."

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Asked how the Baha'i community would fare after such a catastrophic loss at the highest levels of governance, Mr. McGroin said, "Even in our grief, we must look forward because the Baha'i Faith is larger than any one of us. Or larger than any nine of us." He added, "Some confused souls have, after expressing their saddness, inquired about the timing and nature of elections to replace the members of the Universal House of Justice. These few lost individuals, I'm afraid, are seeing the world through material eyes."

When this reported inquired what that could possibly mean, Mr. McGroin shifted in his seat and explained: "As we speak, the International Teaching Centre", he said pointing to a white marble covered building behind me, "has finished intense deliberations and I'm glad to report that they have come to an inscrutable, er, I mean, incontestable conclusion."

"Just because the members of the Universal House of Justice are not materially present, does not mean that they are not spiritually present, you see… in the same way that any soul in the next world can be actively present in our lives." Mr. McGroin continued to explain, "This spiritual presence operates through the divine guidance now given to the ITC, the International Teaching Center, that I mentioned before, in their decision-making and makes it 'the source of all good and freed from error.' The late Universal House of Justice are also present through their work and voluminous writings, such as their reply to specific questions illustrates the principles, attitudes and standards by which the ITC is to evaluate its future deliberations and decisions."

When asked how exactly the nine members were supposed to fulfill their duties if they were busy pushing up daisies, Mr. McGroin waved his hands in the air dismissively and said, "This is old world thinking."

And when asked if this meant that the Universal House of Justice no longer existed, Mr. McGroin categorically disagreed, saying emphatically “Of course it does, what an absurd question. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I must return Bono’s phone call.”

Transparent is as Transparent Does

I’m not sure if any Baha’is who live in Alaska read this humble little blog. I only ask because if there are any fellow Baha’is from there, they probably already know the news that I’m about to share with you.

The great State of Alaska has recently decided to become so transparent that they have put their whole checkbook on the internet for everyone to see.

All expenses over $1000 are detailed and shared on their Division of Finance website. You can download the spreadsheet in either Excel or Adobe PDF.

Can you imagine that? total transparency from a state government?!? I was floored when I read this! Like many others I don’t hold politicians and by relationship, the bureaucracy of government in high regard. But here they were surprising the heck out of me!

One of my pet peeves is how opaque the Baha'i administration is when it comes to the fund. I've already gripped about it here so you can read that instead of me rehashing it all.

As far as I know, there is no precedent for the kind of transparency that Alaska has implemented in any religious organization. In the previous discussion Sonja mentioned that as a member of a local New Zealand Baha'i community they did have transparency. But sadly, I find this the exception, rather than the rule. Even this iota of transparency is limited to the local level. I have heard of no NSA being equally transparent with their member community.

But even if no religious organization is transparent… who cares? I want the Baha'i Faith to blaze trails, to go where others haven't, to be refreshing, exciting, invigorating, and to inspire individuals.

Money is just that, money. It is not the end all and be all of a community. It is simply a tool. So then the question is, are we using this tool to our best ability? are we bending it to perform fully in service of the Cause? are we using it in a way that encourages fellowship, unity and growth?

I would argue that more transparency would serve those ends rather than less. This is not a new idea really. Many for-profit organizations have this level of transparency. Just search for "open book management".

To me, personally, when I see that the Baha'i administration doesn't share information about the fund… it communicates that they don't trust me. That they don't want me in the loop. I'm not included. I'm supposed to stand over there and just hand over my money.

On the flip side, asking for transparency can be seen as a sign that we, the Baha'i community are implying that we don't trust those who are on the institutions and manage the funds of the Faith. All I can say is that, unfortunately, we don't have a spotless record on that. Mistakes have been made and since we are only fallible human beings struggling to transform into higher beings, we will undoubtedly continue to face such challenges.

Which then begs the question, would it serve such purposes to be more transparent or less? would secrecy and opacity serve the interests of those that stray? making it easier for them to hide and defraud? or would it make it more difficult?

In any case, the advantages of transparency go leaps beyond such concerns. The much larger picture is that transparency and the sharing of information creates unity and inspires individuals to be motivated by loftier ideals.

Anyway, those are my rambling thoughts. What do you think?

No related posts.

Truth Happens

If I seem to have not updated the past few days it is because I've been very busy. In fact there is much that I would like to write and share with you. Especially a recent event which, I believe, is one for the history books. But of course, you won't hear or read about it from any official Baha'i source.

Until soon, I hope this will tide you over and perhaps serve as a small hint of what is to come.

It is a commercial for linux. Although you may not know what that is or even care, the message is wonderful and why I wanted to share it with you:

first they ignore you…
then they laugh at you…
then they fight you…
and then you win.

– Mohandas Ghandi

Tsunami Response (or lack thereof)

I think Karen was one of the first out there that asked whether there was any official "Baha'i" response to the recent earthquake/tsunami in South East Asia. It is safe to say, that other than the limp response letter which she cites in her blog from the NSA of the United States to an individual believer wondering what the heck should be done, there is no real

concerted and significant effort underway.I'm know that individual Baha'is are donating to various charity organizations but there hasn't even been a press release from the BWC which would express the condolences of the Baha'i world community at such a monumental loss of life. I know that such a message would be of little comfort to those who have suffered and continue to do so in the aftermath, but it would be the minimum act of decorum to show that the Baha'i institutions are actually living in this world.

There have been many objections raised to the critique of this non-action: the institutions can not use the Baha'i funds for non-Baha'i purposes; there are no such funds available because each insititution is operating at razor thin margins, if not outright bankruptcy; we can not accept donations from non-Baha'is so we can't donate to non-Baha'i causes; the best thing for us to do is to slog on and do "God's work"; Baha'is don't have the infrastructure or means to make a significant difference, etc…

Balderdash.

The institutions do have the money (the Canadian NSA by itself has in excess of $20 million sitting in its coffers collecting dust and interest – something which they tell the tax authorities because they have to, but not the Canadian Baha'is because they don't have to). And the institutions are able to donate to non-Baha'i causes. Where does it say in the Writings they don't? And what the heck does this expression mean anyway: "non-Baha'i" purposes or causes? Is it charitable? does it help the poor, hungry, destitute, needy? well, then it is "Baha'i" (in spirit and ideals) through and through.

Jeebus! Look at the whole life of the Person who we are all supposed to emulate: Abdu'l-Baha. He spent every waking moment serving mankind and trying to better its lot. Are we, the spiritual followers of such ideals, then supposed to brush aside His whole brilliant life and example?

Another ignorant statement made over and over again is that Baha'is can not accept money from non-Baha'is THIS IS FALSE. I'll say it again:

THIS IS F A L S E

Got that? ok. I'll say it again real quiet: t h i s i s f a l s e. Baha'is can indeed accept donations from non-Baha'is – as long as those funds are not comingled with the Baha'i

funds and are used for the general service of mankind – be they Muslim, Christian, Jew, atheist, vegan, etc.

As to the objection that we should keep our nose the the grindstone and keep busy with "God's work", you really have to wonder about the sanity of a person who believes that such an acute and immediate need should be ignored, simply because there are chronic challenges in the world. Would God really want you to go to Ruhi class or to raise/donate money so that a family in Bangladesh has medicine and food in the aftermath of this devastation? How is one "God's work" and not the other? Think about it.

And the other silly objection raised is that Baha'is simply don't have the infrastructure to do this kind of work. Duh! Neither would the Red Cross, Medicin sans Frontieres, etc. if they hadn't gotten off their lazy asses and created one a long time ago. But even without any infrastructure, what's stopping, say the BMA from organizing a fundraising and then donating the resulting monies to a slew of such charitable organizations who do have the infrastructure in place.

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Here is an interesting article I stumbled upon recently. Basically it is talking about the reaction of the Indonisian Muslims to the assistance offered by the US. Some Indonesians are criticising the size and reluctance with which it was given (after some alleged political arm twisting in the world court of public opinion and the UN), but many others are praising it and facing the reality that it means they will have to revise the caricature 'evil empire' image. Indonesians are also questioning why fellow Muslim states such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have donated so little.

The Baha'is and the Baha'i administration can learn a lot from two points in this article. First, that the world at large does in fact notice when someone comes to help those in need. Even more so if this is done sacrificially (the US is being praised for helping, but compared to their daily bill in Iraq it is a pittance). Second, that such help rendered at a historic time of suffering goes a long way in dispelling years and years of carefully doled out propaganda and misinformation.

So to relate it to the Faith; had the Baha'i community shown an outporing of generosity (which although it may not have been comparatively high in dollar values, would be high

in relation to the means of the 6-7 million adherents) this would have been a brilliant testament to their true intentions towards the world and fellow man.

As well, it may have caused an interesting conversation to be started by many Muslims who might have ask why fellow Muslim countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia, etc. discriminate against the very people that helped them in their hour of need. Or they might even ask their own Imams right there in Jakarta. Or they might think, hey, these Baha'is perhaps, aren't that bad, maybe I'll befriend one next time I run into him/her.

Notice that i'm not talking about a bribe of any sort. I don't want some idiot thinking that what I'm proposing is that Baha'is go out there and exchange money, food, etc. for goodwill. I'm simply saying that doing such charitable acts is in accordance to the Baha'i Faith and its ideals. And that it would as a consequence, lead people to really think about things they accepted at face value.

A real, once in a lifetime opportunity was lost here.

****

Rumour has it that there is an unannounced official Baha'i response underway right now. Its just that we aren't told about it because, you know, it wouldn't be dignified to holler at the top of your lungs whenever you perform a charitable act. I confess to guffawing in response to such cherubic answers. Fact of the matter is that whenever an individual or an institution of the Faith does something worthwhile in SED or charitable causes, we hear about it. Nothing wrong with that. There is grandstanding and then there is simply informing people about what you are up to.

It is shameful that we do not see a collective Baha'i response at this distressing time. And it is confounding when we see the rest of the "non-Baha'is" out there doing exactly what Baha'u'llah commanded and what Abdu'l-Baha showed through his own life – serving mankind and helping your fellow man. You really have to wonder about the state of the Baha'i community when non-Baha'is are more Baha'i-like.

Funny thing is that tomorrow some Baha'is will still hold up their noses and consider non-Baha'is as belonging to "the old world order" while those same people are rushing about doing exactly what we Baha'is should be doing.

If it wasn't so tragically sad it would indeed be (haha) funny.

Turmoil in Iran Simmering, Not Over

Although news about Iran's stolen election have fallen off the radar of most news outlets, things have not calmed down or been resolved. Not by a long shot.

While the ruthless Basij and riot police were able to suppress the protests and prevent any new ones, the same discontent simmer beneath the surface ready to explode at any moment.

If this does play out following the same time line as the Iranian revolution 30 years ago, it will go on for months and build momentum slowly. I'm still not convinced that it will however. The Islamic Republic has shown itself to be completely without mercy when it comes to internal challenges. There is no line they will not cross to maintain power.

But it would seem that Rafsanjani has been busy in Qom. The Assembly of Qom Seminary Scholars and Researchers recently released a shocking statement (see below).

SO BASICALLY THE ELECTION WAS BETWEEN A BAD GUY NAMED AHMADINEJAD AND A LESS BAD GUY NAMED MOUSAVI...
IT LOOKED LIKE MOUSAVI MIGHT WIN, BUT AHMADINEJAD WAS DECLARED WINNER BEFORE ALL THE VOTES WERE COUNTED.
SO WAS THE ELECTION STOLEN FROM THE IRANIANS, DAD?
YES, IT WAS, HONEY, AND EVERYONE KNOWS IT!
I DIDN'T. I'M NEVER GETTING INTO COLLEGE!
IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU, SAM — IT'S THEIR MOMENT.

Doonesbury

Since this all began I kept a running tally of links to important articles, new developments and analysis. I've continued to add links to it but since the list is getting really long I'll keep going below:

- Trouble in Iran (VBS TV)
- New Tool to Circumvent Government Internet Controls (Blog)
- Leading Qum Clerical Group Defies Khamenei (NY Times)
- Iran's Green Wave (The Nation)
- Rafsanjani's Carefully Crafted Statement (CNN)
- Iran's Revolutionary Guard (LA Times)
- Iran Goes on Strike (Daily Beast)
- Iranian Protesters Get Creative (Times)
- 'Iran trial' for UK embassy staff (BBC)
- Mousavi Promises To Continue Protests (Washington Post)
- Iran protests flare on anniversary of 1999 riots (Guardian)
- Iranian exile speaks out against militia he once supported (LA Times)
- The New Democrats (The New Republic)
- Inside the Iranian Crackdown (WSJ)
- Misreading Iran's unrest (LA Times)
- Rafsanjani's Day of Reckoning (The New Republic)
- Tehran's Streets Erupt After Rafsanjani's Speech (LA Times)
- Hard-Line Force Extends Grip Over a Splintered Iran (NY Times)
- Khatami Calls for Referendum (CBC)
- Iran opposition leader plans large-scale social movement (LA Times)

There is also an interesting site I stumbled onto with fascinating pictures and images of the olden Mid-East. There is only one that directly pertain to the Baha'i Faith. And I believe it is incorrect or at least incorrectly labeled. It is the image below:

AbdulBaha's grandsons from mideastimage.com

> Photograph, of the grandsons of ABDUL BAHA, taken in Acre [Acca]/Syria in 1905. One of the two grandsons is Shoghi [Showqi] Effendi,known as the "Guardian of the Cause"…

Neither of the two men resemble Shoghi Effendi (not even close!). But the other images of the cities and people of the time of Abdu'l-Baha are interesting nonetheless.

Two Baha'i Conferences: Arizona & Haifa

During the short period of time towards the end of December when most are on holiday for Hanukkah, Christmas and New Year's the Baha'i community had two significant conferences. Each was separated by half a world in distance and an equal measure of distance in tone. The first was the 26th annual Grand Canyon Baha'i Conference held in Arizona, US between December 23rd and 26th.

This year's Arizona conference featured the following speakers: David Young, Fariba Aghdasi, Erica Toussaint (US NSA member and previous ABM Propagation), Jena Khadem Khodadad, Kavian Sadeghzadeh Milani, Ghasem Bayat, and Sharon and Jos?[illegible] Fiero. There were also speakers for junior youth and many performers, including Andy Grammar.

If you attended, share with us how it was. From what I've heard from fellow Baha'is, the Arizona conference is a great place for young Baha'is to meet prospective future partners. I still chuckle recalling the anecdote of a friend who attended the conference a few years ago and was cornered in an elevator by a Persian Baha'i mother (on behalf of her daughter). When she found out he was a medical doctor, he had a hard time getting away from her for the rest of the conference.

So if you did attend, I hope you practiced your Baha'i pick-up lines: "Baby, I just did some Ruhi Book 2 and now I wanna pay you a home visit." or "Why don't you make like the

Treasurer's Report at Feast and give me your digits?". But I'm sure most attendees were able to squeeze in some other activities as well.

The other conference was in Haifa for the Counsellors between December 28th and January 1st 2011. During this conference, "deliberations will be held on the features of the next Five Year Plan". So we have that to look forward to.

The Universal House of Justice wrote a letter to the conference attendees to provide its guidance. There are many portions that were notable for me from this letter, one of them was this excerpt:

> Service on the institutions and agencies of the Faith is indeed a tremendous privilege, but not one that is sought by the individual; it is a duty and responsibility to which he or she may be called at any given time. It is understandable, of course, that all those involved in Baha'is administration would rightly feel they have been invested with a singular honour in forming part, in whatever way, of a structure designed to be a channel through which the spirit of the Cause flows. Yet they should not imagine that such service entitles them to operate on the periphery of the learning process that is everywhere gaining strength, exempt from its inherent requirements. Nor should it be supposed that membership on administrative bodies provides an opportunity to promote one's own understanding of what is recorded in the Sacred Text and how the teachings should be applied, steering the community in whatever direction personal preferences dictate.

Universal House of Justice Letter to Conference of Continental Boards of Counsellors (December 2010):

Two Openings in Universal House of Justice

Breaking News !!

Hartmut Grossmann and Glenford E. Mitchell have relinquished their membership with the approval of the Universal House of Justice.

They have been members of the UHJ since 2003 and 1982 respectively. According to the Constitution of the UHJ (Section V. 2.) there are three ways in which a vacancy can occur:

> a) Should any member of the Universal House of Justice commit a sin injurious to the common weal, he may be dismissed from membership by the Universal House of Justice.
>
> b) The Universal House of Justice may at its discretion declare a vacancy with respect to any member who in its judgement is unable to fulfil the functions of membership.
>
> c) A member may relinquish his membership on the Universal House of Justice only with the approval of the Universal House of Justice.

However, there will be no by-election called since both will continue to serve until Ridvan 2008. It seems this announcement is to inform the NSA voters that Grossmann and Mitchell will be retiring and therefore should not be elected (again).

So who will be the new members of the House? God only knows but I'm willing to bet that it will be two men from the International Teaching Center.

That's what we've had since 1983. Before that year the members of the UHJ were picked from the pool of National Spiritual Assembly membership. For more information, see the links below. Mitchell is the current officeholder that has served the longest among his current peers. He was the last member of a National Spiritual Assembly (United States) to be elected to the UHJ.

Anyone care to place a bet? My rusty coin is on Gustavo Correa and Stephen Hall. Why? Elementary my dear Watson.

Related:

The Song Remains the Same

The Circle is Complete

Baha'i Administrative Bureaucracy

UHJ Calls for 41 Regional Conferences

As Alison mentioned in her recent message about clusters, in the grand scheme of Baha'i multi-year plans, 2008 is the mid-point between 1996 and 2021. The future date being the centenary of the Formative Age of the Baha'i Faith.

To celebrate this and to "deliberate on its exigencies" the Universal House of Justice today called for 41 regional conferences to be held around the world. Check the map to see if your city is on the list. Each of the regional conferences will have 2 ITC counsellors as representatives of the UHJ. And Baha'is wonder why there is a revolving door between the two administrative bodies!

To see the document full page click on the top leftmost button (looks like a rectangle within a darker rectangle). You can also find the document here UHJ Calls for Regional Conferences (October 2008) along with all the other neat stuff uploaded there.

Here is a map showing all of them:

UHJ on Priority for Elimination of Racial Prejudice

A recent letter from the Universal House of Justice (via the Secretariat) responding to a question from an individual Baha'i addresses the question of racial prejudice and the priority that the Baha'i community should place upon its elimination in the US.

We don't have the actual question but from the reply we can infer that it juxtaposed the prominence that Shoghi Effendi placed upon it with the more recent exhortations from the UHJ and ITC on the "framework for growth":

> You indicate that some friends wonder whether the Guardian's statement characterizing racial prejudice as "the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Baha'is community at the present stage of its evolution" still applies to the racial situation in the United States, since it was written so long ago. The House of Justice has determined that it is not productive to approach the issue in this manner, as it gives rise to an implicit and false dichotomy that, either what the Guardian said is no longer important, or it is so important that it must be addressed before or apart from all other concerns

Ultimately the House sides with themselves on the issue, writing that the framework for growth takes precedence:

> Only if the efforts to eradicate the bane of prejudice are coherent with the full range of the community's affairs, only if they arise naturally within the systematic pattern of expansion, community building, and involvement with society, will the American believers expand their capacity, year after year and decade after decade, to make their mark on their community and society and contribute to the high aim set for the Baha'iss by "Abdu'l-Bah?? to eliminate racial prejudice from the face of the earth.

I'm a bit puzzled by their claim that:

> Even if such a community were to focus the entirety of its resources on the problem of racial prejudice, even if it were able to heal itself to some extent of that cancerous affliction, in the face of such a monumental social challenge the impact would be inconsequential.

Because one of the most famous quotes from Shoghi Effendi on teaching is this:

> Not by the force of numbers, not by the mere exposition of a set of new and noble principles, not by an organized campaign of teaching – no matter how world-wide and elaborate in its character – not even by the staunchness of our faith or the exaltation of our enthusiasm, can we ultimately hope to vindicate in the eyes of a critical and skeptical age the supreme claim of the Abha Revelation. One thing, and only one thing, will unfailingly and alone secure the undoubted triumph of this sacred Cause, namely, the extent to which our own inner life and private character mirror forth in their manifold aspects the

splendor of those eternal principles proclaimed by Bah??'u'll??h.
The Baha'is Magazine – Star of the West, September 1925, Vol. 16 No. 6, page 538

Doesn't that explicitly contradict the UHJ? Especially since Shoghi Effendi excludes "an organized campaign of teaching – no matter how world-wide and elaborate in its character" and posits that the extent to which we live the Baha'i principles in our lives is the key? wouldn't a community that "mirrors forth" the principle of the unity of mankind, with no racial prejudice, ultimately "secure the undoubted triumph" of the Cause?

As always, I'd like to hear your thoughts. For your consideration, here's the full letter:

No related posts.

UN Special Rapporteur Report on Iran's Human Rights Abuses

The UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran, Dr. Ahmad Shaheed, is included below. When the interim report was announced last year it sent ripples through diplomatic and human rights channels.

Iran's human rights violations are many, the section below (section F) highlights the plight of Baha'is. At the bottom you can view and download the report in full.

F. Unrecognized religious communities

59. The Special Rapporteur continues to be alarmed by communications that demonstrate the systemic and systematic persecution of members of unrecognized religious communities, particularly the Baha'i community, in violation of international conventions. Moreover, the Government's tolerance of an intensive defamation campaign meant to incite discrimination and hate against Baha'is violates its obligations as set out in article 5 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. According to one report, 440 instances of slanderous speech against Baha'is were

published or broadcasted in the past two years. One such article, posted by the Rasa news agency on 8 March 2011, accused the Baha'i community of attempting to subvert Islam.

60. Baha'is continue to be arbitrarily arrested and detained for their beliefs, in violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In a report submitted to the Special Rapporteur, it was alleged that 474 Baha'is had been arrested since August 2004. Of that number, 97 were currently imprisoned (see annex, table IV); 199 had been released on bail and were awaiting trial; 26 had been released without bail; 96 had been tried and sentenced, and free pending appeal or summons to begin serving their sentences; 34 had been tried and sentenced and had completed their prison terms and/or paid a fine; 14 sentences had been overturned on appeal; and 5 Baha'is had served their prison sentences and begun their terms of internal exile. An additional 35 arrests were reportedly made between August and November 2011.

61. Baha'is are subjected to severe socio-economic pressure, in violation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; in some cases, they have been deprived of property, employment and education. In recent months, for example, 10 shops and a well owned by Baha'is in two cities in Semnan Province were sealed by the authorities. Moreover, copies of several unsettling Government documents dating back to 1991 prescribe deprivation of education, the establishment of an office to counteract Baha'i publications, the denial of "positions of influence" to them and the trades prohibited for them. One Baha'i student reported in an interview that 800 Baha'is were denied university admission the year that his application was denied. In addition, several Baha'is recently arrested were affiliated with the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), which is a university designed to educate Iranian Baha'is that are excluded from education.

United States NSA Election – 2011

The delegates of the 103rd Baha'i National Convention in the United States have elected the new members of the National Spiritual Assembly (in descending order of votes):

Kenneth E. Bowers
Jacqueline Left Hand Bull
David F. Young

Muin Afnani
S. Valerie Dana
Erica Toussaint-Brock
Robert C. Henderson
Juana C. Conrad
Fariba Aghdasi

The new member is Dr. Fariba Aghdasi (elected with the least number of votes among the nine) who replaced William L.H. Roberts (acting as Treasurer last year) who also had the lowest votes among the previous NSA members. All other members of the NSA were re-elected as we've come to expect from the effect of incumbency.

For why such tiny incremental changes in membership really amount to no changes at all, please see the "Fable of the 5 Monkeys".

I couldn't find much information about the new NSA member except this short biography from a Baha'i site:

> Dr. Fariba Aghdasi has served as the Deputy Secretary of the Regional Baha'is Council of the Southwestern States since the formation of that institution. She is also the Director of the Regional Teaching Office, an office of the Regional Baha'is Council serving the advancement of the clusters in the region. She has been a long term pioneer to South Africa and to Zimbabwe and has served on its National Spiritual Assembly. She has also served as the Regional Coordinator for the Regional Training Institute in the Western States in its formative years. She is a professional engineer holding a doctoral degree in Mechanical Engineering and was previously professor and head of the Department of Mechanical Engineering in Zimbabwe. She is married with two children and currently lives in Central California.

Here is a short video of Dr. Fariba Aghdasi speaking at the Grand Canyon conference held during the Christmas holidays last year in Arizona. Taking part in such a high profile event just months before voting couldn't have hurt her chances to be elected to the NSA.

Universal House of Justice Letter on Baha'i Elections

25 March 2007

To the Baha'is of the World

Dear Baha'i Friends,

One of the signs of the breakdown of society in all parts of the world is the erosion of trust and collaboration between the individual and the institutions of governance. In many nations the electoral process has become discredited because of endemic corruption. Contributing to the widening distrust of so vital a process are the influence on the outcome from vested interests having access to lavish funds, the restrictions on freedom of choice inherent in the party system, and the distortion in public perception of the candidates by the bias expressed in the media. Apathy, alienation, and disillusionment are a consequence, too, as is a growing sense of despair of the unlikelihood that the most capable citizens will emerge to deal with the manifold problems of a defective social order. Evident everywhere is a yearning for institutions which will dispense justice, dispel oppression, and foster an enduring unity between the disparate elements of society.

The World Order of Baha'u'llah is the divinely ordained system for which nations and peoples so desperately search. Hailed by the Bab in the Persian Bayan, its foundational features prescribed by Baha'u'llah Himself, this Order is without precedent in human history for its standard of justice and its commitment to the practical realization of the oneness of mankind, as well as for its capacity to promote change and the advancement of world civilization. It provides the means by which the Divine Will illumines the path of human progress and guides the eventual establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Throughout the entire planet the devoted followers of Baha'u'llah are labouring to develop further the Baha'i Administrative Order described by the Guardian "not only as the nucleus but the very pattern of the New World Order", thus setting the foundation for a world civilization destined to yield its dazzling splendour in the centuries to come. They do so notwithstanding the conditions of turmoil and disorder alluded to by Baha'u'llah in affirming that "the world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order. Mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System–the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed."

With the concerted worldwide endeavour to advance the process of entry by troops gathering momentum through implementation of the provisions of the Five Year Plan, it is now opportune that the believers everywhere give greater attention to strengthening the process by which Assemblies, national and local, are elected. The manner of participation by all adult members of the community in these elections is a distinguishing feature of the System of Baha'u'llah; for it is a bounden duty that confers a high privilege upon every Baha'i to select, as a responsible citizen of the new world being brought into existence, the composition of the institutions having authority over the functioning of the Baha'i community. In this regard, indifference and neglect on the part of any believer are alien to the spirit of the Cause. The friends must strive ceaselessly to avoid being contaminated with these destructive attitudes, which have inflicted such damage on the integrity and authority of the institutions of a declining world order.

In describing Baha'i elections, Shoghi Effendi, through a letter written on his behalf, conveyed that "Baha'i electoral procedures and methods have, indeed, for one of their essential purposes the development in every believer of the spirit of responsibility. By emphasizing the necessity of maintaining his full freedom in the elections, they make it

incumbent upon him to become an active and well-informed member of the Baha'i community in which he lives."

The manner in which the elector exercises the right and privilege to cast his vote is therefore of great significance. Shoghi Effendi's instruction in this passage further explains that "to be able to make a wise choice at the election time, it is necessary for him to be in close and continued contact with all local activities, be they teaching, administrative or otherwise, and to fully and whole-heartedly participate in the affairs of the local as well as national committees and assemblies in his country. It is only in this way that a believer can develop a true social consciousness and acquire a true sense of responsibility in matters affecting the interests of the Cause. Baha'I community life thus makes it a duty for every loyal and faithful believer to become an intelligent, well-informed and responsible elector, and also gives him the opportunity of raising himself to such a station."

While there should be no mention of personalities in connection with Baha'I elections, it is quite appropriate for believers to discuss the requirements and qualifications for membership in the institution to be elected. Shoghi Effendi offers clear guidance on this point: "I feel that reference to personalities before the election would give rise to misunderstanding and differences. What the friends should do is to get thoroughly acquainted with one another, to exchange views, to mix freely and discuss among themselves the requirements and qualifications for such a membership without reference or application, however indirect, to particular individuals." Among the "necessary qualities" specified by the Guardian are those "of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience". With a heightened awareness of the functions to be performed by the elected body, the believer can properly assess those for whom a vote should be cast. From among the pool of those whom the

elector believes to be qualified to serve, selection should be made with due consideration given to such other factors as age distribution, diversity, and gender. The elector should make his choice after careful thought over an extended period before the actual election.

When called upon to vote in a Baha'i election, believers should be aware that they are carrying out a sacred task unique to this Dispensation. They should approach this duty in a prayerful attitude, seeking divine guidance and confirmation. As Shoghi Effendi has advised, "they must turn completely to God, and with a purity of motive, a freedom of spirit and a sanctity of heart, participate in the elections."

Through their wholehearted embrace of the Baha'i electoral process, the believers will witness, day by day, a greater contrast between the emerging institutions of the Baha'i Administrative Order and the decaying social order around them. In this increasing distinction will be seen the promise of the glory of the World Order of Baha'u'llah–the System destined to fulfil the highest expectations of humanity.

The Universal House of Justice

Universal House of Justice: Results of By-Election

The Universal House of Justice held a by-election a few days ago and two new members were elected to replace the retiring members: Hooper Dunbar and Peter Khan. The new members were, surprise! both members of the International Teaching Center: Stephen Birkland and Stephen Hall.

Here is the official announcement from the Baha'i News website:

> HAIFA, Israel — The Universal House of Justice has announced the results of a by-election for two of its nine members.
>
> The new members are Stephen Birkland and Stephen Hall, elected in balloting in which members of national Baha'i governing bodies around the world serve as electors. The voting was done by mail, and results were conveyed today to all Baha'i National Spiritual Assemblies.
>
> The Universal House of Justice is the head of the Baha'i Faith. Its permanent seat is at the Baha'i World Centre in Haifa, and all members reside here for the duration of their service.
>
> The regular election of the nine members of the House of Justice occurs every five years at an international convention, held in Haifa. The most recent election was in 2008.
>
> The by-election was necessary to fill two vacancies created when the House of Justice approved the request of two members, Mr. Hooper Dunbar and Dr. Peter Khan, to relinquish their positions owing to their advanced age and the heavy burden of work involved in membership.

The previous change in membership was when two other members chose to retire in 2007. There was no by-election since they stayed on until the regular election scheduled for April 2008. Since the House of Justice is elected every 5 years, it seems that Dunbar and Khan decided to leave 'early' rather than wait another few years until April 2013.

As you might recall, Hartmut Grossmann and Glenford E. Mitchell were replaced by Shahriar Razavi and Gustavo Correa – both members of the ITC (naturally). Back in late 2007 I had predicted the election of Stephen Hall to the House but I was just a bit too early. By the way, Grossmann ties L. Hakim for the distinction of the shortest membership duration.

This trend to retire (while still alive) is rather new. When the UHJ was first instituted there was no such policy and 4 members actually passed away while still serving. Finally the UHJ relented and allowed its members to withdraw voluntarily and enjoy retirement. The first member to do so was David Hoffman.

The most important trend is that we have, since 2008, a membership drawn completely from the ITC – which itself is appointed by the Universal House of Justice. So in essence, there is a closed loop with the UHJ appointing its future candidates (of couse, only the male members of the ITC are qualified for election).

This is certainly worthy of note but does this matter? ultimately, does it make a difference if the UHJ is drawn from a small pool of candidates that they themselves have 'vetted'? Some would argue that it doesn't. Personally, I believe that the organizational framework through which the Baha'i institutions are elected (or appointed) does matter. Not only does it markedly stray from the Baha'i administrative structure outlined by Abdu'l-Baha, it can also lead to an ossification through group think.

Hopefully I will find some time in the near future to explain a bit further why I am concerned about the UHJ being melded in effect with the ITC. For now though, I would welcome your thoughts, especially if you disagree with me.

To help you visualize the data, here is an updated infographic showing the complete history of the membership of the Universal House of Justice:

Universal House of Justice: Ridvan Message 2008

Here is the Universal House of Justice's Ridvan Message for 2008.

If you have trouble reading it below, you can follow the above link to download the document to your computer. You can also use the menu to print it out.

Universal House of Justice: Ridvan Message 2009

Happy Ridvan! Here is this year's (rather concise) Ridvan message from the Universal House of Justice:

To the Baha'is of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

A mere three years ago we set before the Baha'i world the challenge of exploiting the framework for action that had emerged with such clarity at the conclusion of the last global Plan. The response, as we had hoped, was immediate. With great vigour the friends everywhere began to pursue the goal of establishing intensive programmes of growth in no less than 1,500 clusters worldwide, and the number of such programmes soon started to climb. But no one could have imagined then how profoundly the Lord of Hosts, in His inscrutable wisdom, intended to transform His community in so short a span of time. What a purposeful and confident community it was that celebrated its accomplishments at the midway point of the current Plan in forty-one regional conferences across the globe! What an extraordinary contrast did its coherence and energy provide to the bewilderment and confusion of a world caught in a spiral of crisis! This, indeed, was the community of the blissful to which the Guardian had referred. This was a community aware of the vast potentialities with which it has been endowed and conscious of the role it is destined to play in rebuilding a broken world. This was a community in the ascendant, subject to severe repression in one part of the globe, yet rising up undeterred and undismayed as a united whole and strengthening its capacity to achieve Baha'u'llah's purpose to liberate humankind from the yoke of the most grievous oppression. And in the nearly eighty-thousand participants who attended the conferences we saw the emergence on the historical scene of an individual believer supremely confident in the efficacy of the Plan's methods

and instruments and remarkably deft at wielding them. Each and every soul of this mighty sea stood as testimony to the transforming potency of the Faith. Each and every one was evidence of Baha'u'llah's promise to assist all those who arise with detachment and sincerity to serve Him. Each and every one offered a glimpse of that race of beings, consecrated and courageous, pure and sanctified, destined to evolve over generations under the direct influence of Baha'u'llah's Revelation. In them we saw the first signs of the fulfilment of our hope expressed at the outset of the Plan that the edifying influence of the Faith would be extended to hundreds of thousands through the institute process. There is every indication that, by the end of the Ridvan period, the number of intensive programmes of growth around the world will have crossed the 1,000 mark. What more can we do at the opening of this most joyous Festival than to bow our heads in humility before God and offer Him thanksgiving for His unbounded generosity to the community of the Greatest Name.

Here is last year's Ridvan message if you missed it. And if you were ever curious where exactly the original Garden of Ridvan is located, wonder no more: Where is the Garden of Ridvan?

Universal House of Justice: Ridvan Message 2010

Below you'll find the most recent Ridvan message from the Universal House of Justice. This has to be the most Ruhi-laden Ridvan message I've ever read from them. It seems that the House is doubling down on Ruhi. It is also a very long message at 11 pages.

Only time will tell if that is a wise decision. I haven't seen any data that suggests that it is. For example, in the case of Columbia which is ground zero for Ruhi, after more than 40 years there has been no discernible growth in the Baha'i community. But for now, expect to see an even more intensification of Ruhi activities at the expense of anything and everything else.

A few things jumped out at me. One, they attempt to remove the stigma of "door to door" teaching, which obviously bothers many Baha'is for obvious reasons:

> To assign to their teaching efforts such labels as "door-to-door", even though the first contact may involve calling upon the residents of a home without prior notice, would not do justice to a process that seeks to raise capacity within a population to take charge of its own spiritual, social and intellectual development.

This is rather humorous because simply removing a label or attaching a label to something doesn't change the nature of it. If you are going and knocking on a door to invite the people to an event, then it is what it is. The intention may not be exactly as direct as teaching them the Baha'i Faith but instead inviting them to take part in a process of "spiritual, social and intellectual development" – that doesn't really make any difference to those who have to answer the door with a stranger standing there or to the poor Baha'is who are being pressured to go door to door.

The other is this rather refreshing caution:

> …we feel compelled to raise a warning: It will be important for all to recognize that the value of engaging in social action and public discourse is not to be judged by the ability to bring enrolments. Though endeavours in these two areas of activity may well effect an increase in the size of the Baha'i community, they are not undertaken for this purpose. Sincerity in this respect is imperative. Moreover, care should be exercise to avoid overstating the Baha'i experience or drawing undue attention to fledgling efforts, such as the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, which are best left to mature at their own pace. The watchword in all cases is humility. While conveying enthusiasm about their beliefs, the friends should guard against projecting an air of triumphalism, hardly appropriate among themselves, much less in other circumstances.

This characteristic has already been pointed out by many – including as early as 30 years ago. For more see Denis MacEoin's letter to the LA Study Class. Let me know if anything of interest stands out for you. The previous years Ridvan messages are here:

- 2009 Ridvan message

- 2008 Ridvan message

Universal House of Justice: Ridvan Message 2011

Here is this year's Ridvan message from the Universal House of Justice.

The House starts by acknowledging the culmination of the renovation of the Shrine of the Bab and the centenary of Abdu'l-Baha'is visit to the United States. The recent political turmoil in the Middle East is cast as the expression of the twin processes at play on the world stage; the first, the disintegration of the old order and the second, the constructive maturation of the Baha'i Faith. The UHJ asks Baha'is to be inspired by the example of Abdu'l-Baha as they share their Faith with others.

Update on Kalimat Petition

As I mentioned before, there is a petition appealing the boycott of Kalimat Press by the US NSA. If you haven't yet, please take a moment to read the petition and it's background information to familiarize yourself with the whole situation. I encourage you to sign it. And then to show your support, buy one of the many excellent titles they offer.

But I'm not writing this merely to repeat what I've already mentioned before. I wanted to address the reaction of some Baha'is to the petition. Many have a knee jerk response running along the lines of "petitioning is not Baha'i-like".

As Dilbert quipped, *when did ignorance become a point of view?*

In fact, Baha'i history is replete with instances of petitioning and petitions. To give you some idea of what I mean, I'll provide three specific examples:

The Baha'i temple at Wilmette was built as a result of petitioning by the Baha'is of North America. They had heard a lot of good things coming out of Ishqabad and their temple and had a bad case of temple envy. Abdu'l-Baha received the petitions, acquiesced and came to lay the cornerstone.

The Kitab-i-Aqdas was written after a small group of Baha'is repeatedly petitioned (harassed would be a more accurate albeit non-politically correct adjective) Baha'u'llah for a book of laws. Baha'u'llah had not written any rules until then but acquiesced after the intense and repeated petitions.

In the late 80′s, at the US national convention a petition was distributed to the delegates which asked the UHJ to apply the law of Huquq'u'llah to *all* believers (then it only applied to non-Western Baha'is).

As you can see, petitions are allowed and have been used quite a bit. They have a long and glorious history with the first petitions being presented to Baha'u'llah Himself. I'm sure that if you do a little bit of digging on your own, you'll find more examples. Hopefully, the above puts aside the fallacious belief that the Kalimat petition or petitions in general are somehow 'not kosher' in the Baha'i Faith.

Which brings us to the recent events surrounding the Kalimat petition. Apparently it was presented at the recently held US national convention by a delegate. Or atleast, an attempt was made to do so on the floor. But it was quickly snuffed out by Henderson. No consultation or dialogue was allowed on the matter. And the petition was not allowed to be distributed either.

So it seems that its not petitions *per se* that are anathema but petitions which originate from outside the AO from the grass roots. Those that were there for the Huquq petition, remember seeing, as if by magic, copies of the petition come out of nowhere and with them hundreds of pens with which they were expected to sign it.

US Annual Report from National Spiritual Assembly of US

Here is the Ridvan 2007 Annual Report from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States. My comments and personal thoughts are here.

If you'd like a PDF version click here (pdf). You'll need an Adobe Acrobat or similar software to read it. The underlined are my own emphasis to draw your attention to important points.

Or if you'd like a simple HTML version or you don't have Adobe Acrobat or similar software, you can also view the document here.

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Ridvan 2007 Annual Message

National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States
Members 2006-2007

Kenneth E. Bowers Deputy Secretary-General
Juana C. Conrad Deputy Secretary-General
William E. Davis Chair
Robert C. Henderson Secretary-General
Jacqueline Left Hand Bull Vice-Chair
Dorothy W. Nelson
William L.H. Roberts Treasurer
Erica Toussaint
David F. Young

Dear Baha'i Friends,

We greet you with wholehearted love and admiration as we offer this report of our efforts to achieve significant progress in the process of growth in the United States Baha'i community.

Our assessment of the Baha'i community's spiritual vitality and prospects for growth inspires our confidence that "the elements required for a concerted effort to infuse [our country] with the spirit of Baha'u'llah's Revelation" are robust and capable. Public awareness and receptivity to the Baha'i Faith are high, tens of thousands of Baha'is are trained in the core activities, well over 1,100 children's classes are held regularly, 42 programs of intensive growth are in operation, and Local Spiritual Assemblies and cluster agencies evince increasing vigor in their pursuit of the Plan's goals. Nevertheless, as we reported last year, growth remains low. The past 10 years have witnessed a sharp decline of enrollments (50 percent). This year the current rate of net growth is nearing 0 percent.

At present, we feel that the community as a whole is still learning to appreciate fully the vision and broad range of requirements of the "framework for action" of the Five Year Plan. Having recently completed the Inter-Institutional Conference at Pensacola, we observed that the consultation of the institutional leaders mirrors issues identical to those being raised in clusters across the national community, an indication that inter-institutional meeting participants are actively involved in the clusters. As we approach the end of the first year of the Plan, we take this opportunity to report what we are learning in our efforts to advance the process of growth, and the actions we feel are needed to accelerate our progress.

Signs of progress

Following receipt and initial study of the December 27, 2005, letter of the Universal House of Justice, we launched a series of communications to Local Spiritual Assemblies and the Baha'i community urging the institutions and individual believers to study this seminal document of the Five Year Plan. Among these communications were reports to the friends describing the National Assembly's own approach to the letter's study, and its adoption of the "Framework for Action" as the community's operational plan and baseline for measuring its progress. There is gratifying evidence that the Spiritual Assemblies and friends have taken this duty to heart and are using the letter as the standard reference document of the Plan.

Currently over 22,000 Baha'is have taken at least one institute course, nearly one-third of the believers with known addresses. Some 6,000 are tutors. Slightly fewer than 1,900 study circles function regularly in the community, a trend that has held steady for the past six months. Regular devotional meetings are holding steady at 1,600 nationally. It is

noteworthy that the data cited here are conservative undercounts of the total numbers, based only on registered participants.

There are well over 1,000 regular children's classes, predominantly in centralized Baha'i schools, with a small but growing number of neighborhood classes. Non-Baha'i participation in Baha'i schools averages 36 percent nationally, with neighborhood classes slightly higher. Junior youth groups are increasing slowly and currently number 109.

In addition to the 42 clusters that have launched intensive programs of growth, there are another 100 clusters advancing toward that stage and 100 more that should achieve that level of advancement by the end of the Five Year Plan. We note with great satisfaction that communities where the friends are increasingly involved in the institute process, participating in reflection meetings, and holding devotionals and children's classes are experiencing impressive advances in unity and vitality. Moreover, study circles are proving to be an effective means for the consolidation of new believers, instilling confidence and an intimate sense of connection to the Baha'i community. We are confident that the habituation of these practices will lay the foundation of a Baha'i culture that shares a common vocabulary about growth, and habits of regular engagement with the Word of God, communal prayer, meetings for reflection and planning, and a disciplined focus on the spiritual and social quality of community life, all of which are essential to the long-term development and growth of the Baha'i community.

Among other indicators of the community's spiritual vitality are the continued strength of the flow of pioneers and traveling teachers to international service, and the past five years of record contributions to the Baha'i Funds, the Kingdom Poject, and now the Chilean Temple, for which $10 million has been raised to date.

The division of the western region and the election of the respective Regional Baha'i Councils of the Northwestern and Southwestern States has been very successful and is achieving many of the hoped-for results. Likewise, the transfer of responsibility for the Louis G. Gregory Baha'i Institute to the Regional Baha'i Council of the Southern States has been smooth and productive. The Institute is fast regaining its old spirit and serving an expanding audience of believers, institutions, and seekers, advancing the core activities. The Native American Baha'i Institute and the Magdalene Carney Baha'i Institute continue to be outstanding models of systematic advancement of the growth process. Moreover, a

thriving network of increasingly effective Regional Training Institutes serves the needs of friends in clusters throughout the community.

Pilot projects of Internet proclamation launched last year strongly suggest that public receptivity to the Baha'i message remains extremely high. Seekers who contact the Seeker Response System are nurtured to the point that a growing number are becoming actively engaged with the Baha'i community. Historically, almost half (48 percent), and currently 75 percent, of the seekers who call the Seeker Response Line ask how to find the local Baha'is.

And finally, our communications strategy aimed at refining Baha'i publications and productions to reach a broader Baha'i and non-Baha'i audience has produced multiple national awards (including 11 more this year) for Brilliant Star magazine, World Order, U.S. Baha'i Newsreel, and the Baha'i public website (www.bahai.us). We have also made continuous improvements to The American Baha'i, messages to the Nineteen Day Feasts, and to experimental communications such as "viral videos." We are especially pleased with the development of electronic regional newsletters by the Regional Councils and the National Teaching Committee, which have proven to be important resources for learning about growth.

The range of our activities and the regular flow of correspondence with the individual believers and Baha'i institutions expose the National Assembly to a wide diversity of local experiences and perceptions by which we have gained a broad understanding of the state of the Baha'i community. We are pleased to report that a solid core of the friends has embraced the Plan and is responsive to the guidance of
the House of Justice.

The National Spiritual Assembly is compelled by profound feelings of admiration and gratitude to salute Continental Counselors Dr. Farzin Aghdasi, Dr. Eugene S. Andrews, Mr. Stephen Birkland, Ms. Rebequa Murphy, and Mr. Gerardo Vargas and the members of their Auxiliary Boards for their heroic and sacrificial leadership during the course of the Five Year Plan. The frequent and intimate collaboration we enjoy with the Counselors is a major reason for our confidence in the ultimate success of the Five Year Plan.

Likewise our loving admiration grows stronger for the Regional Baha'i Councils, whose tireless devotion to the challenge of advancing the process of growth has gained the confidence of the friends and increasingly reflects their learning about growth itself.

Growth

These encouraging indices of spiritual vitality stand in sharp contrast to the persistently low rate of growth of our community. At the present rate, our net growth will approach zero. From 1980 to 1997, the Baha'i community nearly doubled in size (77,000 to 137,000, excluding Iranian immigrants), with significant increases in the rate of retention. The 50 percent drop in enrollments since 1997 means that enrollments are now at the same level they were in the 1960s, when the Baha'i community was a small fraction of its current size. The number of enrollments to date for this year is 872.

Although the top tier of clusters with intensive programs of growth in progress currently yields a disproportionate share of aggregate national growth, it would be misleading to suggest that this implies a new development. Historically, those same areas have always contributed disproportionately to growth in this country, as they have the largest populations of Baha'is. The difference now is that while their proportionate contributions remain the same, their rate of enrollments has decreased. The aim of achieving both accelerated and sustained growth has yet to be realized, even in "A" clusters.

Issues for consideration

We believe that the obstacles to growth have nothing to do with the Plan itself and much to do with how the Plan is understood and being implemented. We are optimistic that refinements in our approach to carrying out the Five Year Plan will do much to accelerate the process of growth. Several examples follow.

The role of Local Spiritual Assemblies in the Five Year Plan

The Universal House of Justice has issued substantial guidance on the role of Local Spiritual Assemblies in the Five Year Plan. That guidance describes the "thrilling opportunities" for Spiritual Assemblies to study the guidance of the Five Year Plan, to work in close collaboration with "cluster and core activities," to become "fully involved in all aspects of planning and implementation at the level of the cluster," and to provide "guidance, encouragement and support" for cluster and individual initiatives, to cite just a few examples.

Yet, there is a pervasive feeling of confusion and dislocation among many Local Spiritual Assemblies, including those in “A” clusters.

In our work with Spiritual Assemblies in the United States, we have noted with great satisfaction their progress in learning to maintain focus on the central aims of the Plan while continuing to meet a range of other responsibilities. Assemblies serving large Baha’i communities are prime examples. Despite the challenging obligations imposed by size and complexity, these Assemblies are revitalizing their communities through steady emphasis on the core activities and cluster advancement. At the same time, they are pioneering fresh approaches to pastoral care, external affairs, and social and economic development projects.

We are also pleased to note that the clear majority of the members of these Assemblies are themselves active in the institute training process. Some 60 percent of all Local Spiritual Assembly members have completed at least one book in the Ruhi sequence of courses, 15 percent have completed the whole sequence, and 25 percent have completed Book 7. This rate of participation is disproportionately high compared to the national community. There is also a growing trend among Local Spiritual Assemblies to engage in institutional study of the sequence of courses.

We are concerned that feelings of disempowerment and mixed signals regarding roles and responsibilities are robbing the current Plan of the spiritual benefits that flow from the wholehearted participation of these divine institutions, and the many significant contributions these highly capable Assemblies could make to the progress of the teaching work in a number of areas of the country. Assemblies should feel that their contributions are essential to the Plan’s success and that they are urgently needed.

Narrowness of focus and initiative

In many areas, exclusive focus on the two essential movements has led to misunderstandings as to the kinds of activities that are permissible for the friends to be engaged in and that are consistent with the Plan. The result is a narrowly defined model of growth that permits a small range of initiative, allows little creativity, and accepts few real innovations.

We are frequently asked whether firesides are an acceptable form of teaching, despite a clear call for “campaigns of study circles and firesides” by the Universal House of Justice.

We have received several reports of Local Spiritual Assemblies who have canceled their Baha'i children's classes in order to increase the number of neighborhood classes. We fully appreciate the importance of neighborhood classes as a priority of the Five Year Plan, and have repeatedly encouraged neighborhood classes in The American Baha'i, U.S. Baha'i Newsreel, letters to the Nineteen Day Feast, Spiritual Assembly Development conferences, and other venues. However, our understanding of the January 5, 2006, letter is that both Baha'i schools and neighborhood classes are important. A comprehensive survey of Baha'i schools showed that 36 percent of the children attending them are not Baha'is. After discussion with the Counselors on these points, we have since issued a letter of clarification on Baha'i schools and neighborhood classes to the community.

Another issue is proclamation. While we fully appreciate the need for Baha'i communities to avoid placing undue emphasis on proclamation activities, we have learned from experience that the proper use of media and other forms of proclamation can be invaluable tools for generating seekers, whose interest can then be nurtured through the core activities or other forms of teaching. Our national media initiative practiced the same disciplines of planning, action, and reflection that the House of Justice is exhorting Baha'is everywhere to acquire.

Nearly 1,000 souls entered the Faith through experimental television broadcasts and Internet proclamations. A recent study showed that one out of every six new believers' first point of contact was the Baha'i public website or the Seeker Response telephone line. The problem we face is that proclamation is widely considered to be inconsistent with the framework for action in the Five Year Plan, making it difficult to engage the friends in serious discussion of the uses of media to generate seekers in advanced clusters.

Past experiments have taught us that through media, especially the Internet, we can learn a great deal about seekers' hopes and cares and, especially, about the location of receptive populations.

We are concerned that—notwithstanding the persistent emphasis the House of Justice has placed on the importance of having an outward-looking orientation—hardly a word is spoken about who seekers are, what they want, or how they experienced their contact with the Baha'i community. There is little institutional discussion about the many seekers who start one of the institute courses and do not return, or of what the important features are in a seeker's path to becoming a Baha'i. We are concerned that such narrow definitions of the

process of teaching, which are inconsistent with guidance of the House of Justice, cause us to miss important opportunities for learning how to meet the wide diversity of seekers' needs.

Another limiting factor is that our discourse about teaching does not sufficiently take into consideration issues of broad social concern. During the period from 1980 to 1997, during which the Baha'i community nearly doubled in size, the driving forces of growth were the Baha'i vision for social transformation and practical plans for teaching. Having gained its initial impetus from the sacrifices of the Iranian Baha'is, the Baha'i community was galvanized by a series of visionary messages including the statement on Baha'u'llah, The Promise of World Peace, and the statements on human prosperity, race, equality of the sexes—all inspirational tools for teaching in the context of the House of Justice's vision of the completion of the Mount Carmel projects and its relationship to the process of growth. During that period, Baha'is increased the size of the Baha'i community, the retention of new believers, the number of functioning Spiritual Assemblies, contributions to the Funds, the spiritual education of children and youth, social and economic development, and more.

More recently, the House of Justice has published the statement on religious tolerance, emphasized study of Shoghi Effendi's World Order letters, published One Common Faith, and, in its Ridvan 2006 message, restated classic themes originally addressed by the Guardian to broaden our vision, deepen our understanding, and facilitate the teaching work. However, throughout the country the visionary messages of the past and present are seldom mentioned or employed in the service of teaching, although they remain relevant to broad social concerns.

Baha'is are in the forefront of a divinely ordained process of transforming the world and laying the groundwork for a global civilization. Today, this sense of mission is often challenged by a narrow understanding of Five Year Plan strategies and tactics and an all-too-often inflexible system of implementation. The spirit of galvanizing vision that causes one's heart to pound and impels one to action is overshadowed by the tactical requirements of the Plan and a decade of no progress in growth. We do not wish to idealize the past, in which there were also many challenges. However, we want to recognize and carry forward sound approaches from past efforts as we strive to advance the process of growth today.

We feel a particular need for flexibility and innovation in reaching out to young people-Baha'is and others—as well as to populations that have shown historic receptivity to

growth. In the latter case, there have been some noteworthy developments. For instance, a local Black Men's Gathering in the Detroit area recently was attended by nine African American non-Baha'is. Of these, five enrolled by the end of the weekend. This is an excellent illustration of adapting elements of the Plan, such as devotional meetings and study of the Word of God, with an issue of concern to the seekers, and central to our mission as American Baha'is, in a manner attractive to a specific population.

What appears to be underappreciated in most clusters is that receptive populations, and especially youth, cannot be expected to come to the Faith entirely on our terms. We must acknowledge that there is still much to learn about reaching them, and that successful approaches will eventually emerge to the extent that we cultivate an atmosphere of experimentation, imagination, and audacity.

Next steps

We are keenly aware that a robust atmosphere of learning requires a higher level of vision and discourse and the avoidance of false dichotomies. We intend to continue using our communications outlets to highlight examples of learning about growth.

In the light of our observations on the status of the Five Year Plan in the United States, we feel that the following actions would be beneficial to its progress:

1. Emphasize vision at the local level.

The friends need constant reinforcement of the great spiritual processes at the heart of Baha'u'llah's revelation—"souls must be transformed, new models of life thereby consolidated." They must be inspired to relate the seminal teachings of our Faith to the great problems of society. And they must be given a freer hand to act. Analysis, planning, and strategic focus are essentials to growth, and there is no doubt about the importance of acquiring such skills. But they are matters of the intellect, and are secondary to matters of the heart in inspiring commitment and initiative.

People will make sacrifices for a great purpose that they will not make for activities. A focus on activities at the expense of vision will yield a community that is rule-bound and prone to conflict, where a culture of learning and innovation are nearly impossible, where individuals are treated as "insiders" or "outsiders" according to perceptions of their

obedience to direction, and where expression of legitimate concerns is viewed as uninformed or disloyal.

A sense of vision and purpose, complemented by a practical strategy for accomplishment, inspires unity, self-organization, initiative, and innovation. We see each of these elements in the "framework for
action" of the Five Year Plan, and we are wholeheartedly confident that support of their full expression will inspire a wave of teaching that will bring dramatic results.

2. Encourage the participation of Local Spiritual Assemblies through emphasis of the full range of guidance on the role of Assemblies in the Five Year Plan.

3. Support a wider range of initiatives with the core activities at the hub.

Experimental approaches to media proclamation, fireside campaigns, innovative responses to seekers' needs and preferences fit easily within the "framework for action" and would stimulate the release of a great storehouse of energy among the friends. The core activities of systematic engagement with the Word of God, communal devotions, and the spiritual education of children and junior youth will always remain the foundation of Baha'i community vitality and will only be strengthened by the complementary activities of the friends.

4. Encourage understanding among the friends and institutional members of the complementary function of centralized Baha'i schools and neighborhood classes.

The community must learn that both are needed and both should be multiplied. The friends must also learn to appreciate the complementary relationship between Ruhi Book 3 and the Core Curriculum. Ruhi Book 3 provides 15 lessons for children ages five and six. The Core Curriculum extends the Baha'i education of children for seven years providing systematic education on topics including the Central Figures, the Covenant, Baha'i history and social teachings, dealing with peers, and learning to teach the Baha'i Faith. These two approaches must be harmonized to gain the full benefits of our efforts.

5. Engage in a deeper examination of the factors contributing to current growth.

In our experience at regional and cluster meetings, it is routinely assumed for purposes of analysis that all enrollments in any given cluster can be attributed directly and only to the

core activities. Further investigation almost always yields a far more complex picture that includes proclamations, firesides, striking innovations in approach, and other types of activity that go unacknowledged.

The Native American Baha'i Institute (NABI) is a good example of the benefits of broadening the scope of our work. The National Spiritual Assembly and its agencies have worked closely with NABI for many years, and some Counselors have called the cluster that is home to NABI the most advanced cluster in the United States. The core activities are thriving on the Navajo reservation with high levels of non-Baha'i participation. They serve as the foundation of a variety of services and teaching activities that are designed to meet the specific needs of the resident populations. Special gatherings, social and economic development projects, social services, teaching projects, and other activities complement the core activities to sustain the advancement of growth in that cluster. These must all be taken into consideration to get an accurate picture of the NAB1 formula for growth.

6. Encourage evaluation of our implementation of the institute training process.

To date, the achievement of 6,000 tutors in the United States has not yielded growth in enrollments, nor is the growth of the core activities themselves commensurate with the number of Baha'is who have completed courses (for example, only seven percent of those who have completed Book 1 have started devotional gatherings).

We are firm in our belief that tutor accompaniment is an important part of the solution to improving the Ruhi Institute program's effectiveness, but perhaps other ingredients are also necessary. Careful assessments could be instructive to our understanding of the dynamics of the courses' effectiveness with Baha'is and with seekers, and would, of course, be sent to the Universal House of Justice for its consideration.

7. Encourage cluster initiative.

8. Promote unity and mitigate conflict about the process of growth.

The FACT (Faith Communities Today) Study on the dynamics of growth and decline in American congregations, in which 742 Local Spiritual Assemblies participated, noted that conflict on teaching methods and roles are primary impediments to the growth of faith communities. We fear that the widespread feelings of confusion and dislocation among Spiritual Assemblies are significant factors impeding our growth at this time. This year,

withdrawals (369) from Baha'i membership have risen 30 percent. Our Office of Community Administration reported that this unfortunate increase in withdrawals is partly attributable to the growth of conflict in the community.

Conclusion

Our driving concern is growth. We have prepared this report in the humble hope that it will lead to a fuller implementation of the Five Year Plan's strategies and a marked advancement in the process of growth.

We are confident that continual study of the Plan's guidance will help us refine our implementation strategies to ensure that we gain a larger measure of the benefits of its elements and strategies. Moreover, we are keenly aware of the great challenge involved in advancing the process of entry by troops, and we are deeply appreciative of the devotion and sacrifice of the friends in service to the Plan's goals. We are also mindful of the need for prioritization and a unified framework for action. We feel that these important disciplines can be fundamental to an approach that inspires the believers' passions and liberates their creative energies.

We feel that the principles of leadership described in the House of Justice's letter of May 19, 1994, addressed to this National Assembly, are applicable to the current challenges we face in advancing the process of growth; that the vision and spiritual powers of 'Abdu'l-Baha's Tablets of the Divine Plan invest the community with a special mission, the awareness of which is essential to the revitalization of the teaching work and the winning of outstanding victories on the home front. We are reminded that the Guardian's vision of the role of the American Baha'i community, eloquently described in The Advent of Divine Justice, will arouse "would-be warriors" and "homefront crusaders" to the "double crusade" that is refreshed in the strategy of the core activities.

We are mindful of the need to avoid "over-controlling" the friends, conscious of the "nature of power for action which they possess." We are also mindful that a "wide latitude for action must be allowed, which means that a wide margin for mistakes must also be allowed." And we are keenly aware that "individual initiative is a pre-eminent aspect of this power and [it] is therefore a major responsibility of the institutions to safeguard and stimulate it."

Our present concern is to help the new system of institutions and agencies that work so hard to advance the process of growth to greater mastery of the "art" of seeing that "the importance of the Baha'i administration is its value in serving as a facilitator of the emergence and maintenance of community life in a wholly new mode, and in catering to the requirements of the spiritual relationships which flow from love and unity among the friends. This touches upon a distinguishing characteristic of Baha'i life which such spiritual relationships foster, namely, the spirit of servitude to God, expressed in service to the Cause, to the friends and to humanity as a whole."

We are optimistic that if adjustments are made consistent with the vision, principles, and practical requirements of the Plan, they will, as promised, "build the Baha'i System," attract "the confirmations of Baha'u'llah," and "stimulate the release of pent-up spiritual energies" resulting in a campaign of teaching in which every institution, Baha'i community, and individual believer is enthusiastically and wholeheartedly involved.

With loving Baha'i greetings,

Your obedient servants,

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF THE BAHA'IS OF THE UNITED STATES

US NSA Annual Report – Ridvan 2007

It now seems that the US National Spiritual Assembly may not be as asleep at the wheel as it seems. Or perhaps not all members are snoozing. Or perhaps the full frontal assault of reality on their senses is simply too much for even them to ignore any further.

Here is the full Annual Report of the US National Spiritual Assembly's Ridvan 2007 (pdf). You'll need an Adobe Acrobat or similar software to read it. The underlined are my own emphasis to draw your attention to important points.

If you don't have Adobe Acrobat or similar software, you can view the document here.

Please read the full report for yourself and do your own thinking. Unlike Counsellor Murphy, I agree with Baha'u'llah and believe that we should see things with our own eyes and ears and not through the eyes and ears of others.

Here are some highlights:

- Nevertheless, as we reported last year, growth remains low. The past 10 years have witnessed a sharp decline of enrollments (50 percent). This year the current rate of net growth is nearing 0 percent.

A rare acknowledgement of reality.

- …we observed that the consultation of the institutional leaders mirrors issues identical to those being raised in clusters across the national community

This was apparently a watershed moment where many voiced their displeasure at the current direction of the Baha'i community.

- At the present rate, our net growth will approach zero. From 1980 to 1997, the Baha'i community nearly doubled in size (77,000 to 137,000, excluding Iranian immigrants), with significant increases in the rate of retention. The 50 percent drop in enrollments since 1997 means that enrollments are now at the same level they were in the 1960s, when the Baha'i community was a small fraction of its current size. The number of enrollments to date for this year is 872.

872 !! That's an average of about 72 people a month. For a country of 300+ million people! For the largest and most dynamic Baha'i community in the world. Keep that 872 figure in mind for another reason (coming up).

- Historically, those same areas have always contributed disproportionately to growth in this country, as they have the largest populations of Baha'is. The difference now is that while their proportionate contributions remain the same, their rate of enrollments has decreased. The aim of achieving both accelerated and sustained growth has yet to be realized, even in "A" clusters.

So basically, all this beaurocratic mumbo-jumbo about clusters and Ruhi institutes has resulted in: ZILCH.

- Yet, there is a pervasive feeling of confusion and dislocation among many Local Spiritual Assemblies, including those in "A" clusters.

Hmmm.. I wonder why? It couldn't be that they are being marginalized by appointed institutions, could it?

- We are concerned that feelings of disempowerment and mixed signals regarding roles and responsibilities are robbing the current Plan of the spiritual benefits that flow from the wholehearted participation of these divine institutions

Or maybe it could.

- The result is a narrowly defined model of growth that permits a small range of initiative, allows little creativity, and accepts few real innovations

Yikes! More truth. Can the Baha'i community take this much truth? Maybe the NSA should have rationed it out. Hmmm.. rigidity, little creativity, few real innovations. Why does that strike a bell?

- While we fully appreciate the need for Baha'i communities to avoid placing undue emphasis on proclamation activities…

Double yikes !!

- The problem we face is that proclamation is widely considered to be inconsistent with the framework for action in the Five Year Plan.

Well, it is tough to be teach since that would require an outward focus and we can't be distracted by that sort of thing now. We need to focus on the navel gazing. Navel gazing people! Did you do your Book #8 Navel Gazing?

- hardly a word is spoken about who seekers are, what they want, or how they experienced their contact with the Baha'i community

Who cares! They're just 'seekers'. Are you perhaps, trying to suggest that these are you know, actual people? With feelings, goals, values, desires, faults, challenges and gifts? How preposterous!

- our discourse about teaching does not sufficiently take into consideration issues of broad social concern

Well, as long as you consider Ruhi to be a "broad social concern" we are doing just peachy. Thank you very much.

- During that period, Baha'is increased the size of the Baha'i community, the retention of new believers, the number of functioning Spiritual Assemblies, contributions to the Funds, the spiritual education of children and youth, social and economic development, and more.

Ahhh… yes. I remember it well. The pre-Ruhi period. I'm glad that's over. Aren't you? I mean who wants a dynamic community, vibrant with activities, new believers, contributions to the Funds and all that other stuff. I'd rather have what we have now. Don't you?

- What appears to be underappreciated in most clusters is that receptive populations, and especially youth, cannot be expected to come to the Faith entirely on our terms. We must acknowledge that there is still much to learn about reaching them, and that successful approaches will eventually emerge to the extent that we cultivate an atmosphere of experimentation, imagination, and audacity.

Huh? You mean the answer isn't just Ruhi, more Ruhi and then some more Ruhi?

- People will make sacrifices for a great purpose that they will not make for activities. A focus on activities at the expense of vision will yield a community that is rule-bound and prone to conflict, where a culture of learning and innovation are nearly impossible, where individuals are treated as "insiders" or "outsiders" according to perceptions of their obedience to direction, and where expression of legitimate concerns is viewed as uninformed or disloyal.

Are you saying that we shouldn't just focus on Ruhi classes, devotionals and such just to pump the numbers and stats up for reporting? What kind of crazy talk is that?

Expressions of legitimate concern? Whoa! Next thing you know, constructive criticism will be allowed. Slow down!

- In our experience at regional and cluster meetings, it is routinely assumed for purposes of analysis that all enrollments in any given cluster can be attributed directly and only to the core activities. Further investigation almost always yields a

far more complex picture that includes proclamations, firesides, striking innovations in approach, and other types of activity that go unacknowledged.

Holy Smokes! Are they trying to imply that “core activities” are not all that they’re cracked up to be and that other activities and approaches are yielding better results? Very dangerous grounds the NSA is treading.

- To date, the achievement of 6,000 tutors in the United States has not yielded growth in enrollments, nor is the growth of the core activities themselves commensurate with the number of Baha’is who have completed courses.

Yikes! No results?!

- This year, withdrawals (369) from Baha’i membership have risen 30 percent.

Oh my God !! Remember how many new Baha’is there were in the year? (from above) **872**. And there were **369** withdrawals. To put that in perspective 42% of the amount of new believers walked out the door. They weren’t necessarily the same people but that doesn’t matter. And you know that for each person that officially withdraws from the Faith, there are atleast 2-3 that simply walk away and don’t bother contacting the NSA. The situation is dire. To not see that is to simply refuse to accept reality.

US NSA Loses Court Case Against Orthodox Baha’is

This is about Covenant-Breakers so if you are sensitive, please go and look at some bunny pictures or play with a kitten or something. The rest of you can soldier on.

Since most have no clue what this is all about, here are the Cliff Notes:

Way back in 1966, when normal people were busy growing as much body hair as possible and experimenting with a cocktail of mind bending drugs while listening to music that in all honesty sounds like a pack of cats being strangled, the break away Baha’i group under Mason Remey in New Mexico, US was busy with a totally different undertaking.

They decided it would be a good idea to sue the US NSA in a court of law in order to have the US justice system turn over the Wilmette temple and property over to the "NSA Under the Hereditary Guardianship".

As you can imagine, the US NSA was somewhat miffed at this. They not only defeated the motion but filed a counter claim in which they asserted that the Mason Remey Baha'i organization was guilty of trademark infringement, dilution of the distinctive quality of their rightful trademarks and trade names, and were harming the reputation of the NSA.

Oh you didn't know that the word "Baha'i" is trademarked?

Seriously. It is.

I wish I was making this up.

It was registered by the US NSA with the US trademark office on March 11, 1952 (Registration #556,004). Look it up if you don't believe me.

So is the "Greatest Name" symbol (in Arabic calligraphic script). But wait, you ask, shouldn't Mishkin-Qalam own the trademark to that? or at least his descendents? A spokesperson for the US NSA helpfully replies: *Shut up*.

No word as of yet if the US NSA has patented the postures within the Baha'i long obligatory prayer. But just to be sure, I would suggest you not bend down to pick up anything off the ground for the foreseeable future as that may constitute a dilution of the NSA's reputation.

Anyway, getting back to our story, it turns out the judge back then was high on a groovy mixture of pot and LSD so he sided with the US NSA. Well, to be fair, I have no evidence that the judge was tripping on a cloud 8 miles high… other than the roach clip that was later found by the janitor under his chair and the fact that he went along with the trademarking of "Baha'i".

Think about it.

He gave exclusive legal ownership of the adjective… the very word that describes a religious organization. (Who owns the trademark for "Christian" or "Jew" by the way? Someone look that up between tokes.) I think if that judge was presented with the

trademarking of “chair” or “tree” or “hair” he would have gone along as well. When you’re baked… you’re baked.

Which brings us up to the present day. More accurately, November 2006 – when the present US NSA filed a motion to hold the Orthodox Baha’i group in contempt for not abiding by the 1966 judgement.

You see, they were publishing content online which used the trademark and distinctive words, phrases and markings that the 1966 court ruling said they couldn’t be using.

The defense of the Orthodox Baha’i group was that there was no privity (look it up) between them and the Mason Remey organization to which the previous ruling was bound upon. The US NSA argued that they were one and the same organization, just with a different name.

So they went back and forth:

Are not. Are too. Are not. Are too.

Except the lawyers used more complex words to justify their hefty bills at the end.

The result? The judge (from now on called Amy) just like a parent, after patiently listening to the intricately nuanced arguments for more than a year, finally got tired and sent them all to their respective rooms for a time out. No, I’m just kidding.

Amy, being a sensible woman, free of all narcotic and hallucinogenic compounds ruled as follows:

> … there was a significant doctrinal rift on a critical tenet of each group’s faith, and that the PNBC’s membership varied materially from that of the NSA-UHG. The record further reflects a demonstrable lack of intent to violate the injunction, and that the PNBC was not created to avoid the effect of the injunction. Simply put, there is no substantial continuity between the NSA-UHG and the PNBC, and, as a result … the PNBC have not violated the injunction.

PNBC stands for Provisional National Baha’i Council – it is one of the many acronym soups that you’ll find within the legal documents of the case.

* * * * * * * * *

I am not a legal expert by any means and I hope that some who are will step forward to offer their wisdom… however, it seems to me that the NSA weighed their options and chose to attempt to enforce the 1966 ruling on the Orthodox Baha'is because they estimated that a new legal proceeding would have less chance of winning.

Let's face it, you simply can't trademark or copyright the word, "Baha'i" or the nine pointed star any more than you can the word "Christian" or the symbolic representation of the cross. These do not belong to anyone or any one organization. They are in the public domain.

Can you imagine the Catholic church suing the Protestant church for the use of the symbol of the cross? or saying that they infringe on their intellectual property for calling their houses of worship 'churches' and for having similar ecclesiastical organizations?

The judge would soak his/her robes laughing before dismissing the case and awarding several millions of exemplary punitive damages for bringing a frivolous law suit to the docket.

That option would have been just plain DUMB. But what the US NSA did, I would argue, is almost as dumb. Here's why:

Because it meant entering into a no win situation.

If they had won they would have appeared like bullies and would have given the break-away group much more attention than they would normally get. We're talking about a splinter group of less than 40 people! Forty. Yes, say it again. Forty people.

As well, it would have opened up a hornet's nest as the Orthodox Baha'is would have gained the sympathies of groups like the EFF. In the end, it would have been nothing more than a hollow legal victory overshadowed by a public relations nightmare. Any positive advantages would have been tiny in comparison to the negative outcome. Also a win would have encouraged the Orthodox Baha'i group to continue to lobby the public's sympathies by presenting themselves as martyrs, the underdogs, the wronged ones.

On the other hand, had they lost (which they did) it would have meant that they had wasted both time and money (the Faith's precious resources) to only receive a setback. A loss

would embolden the Orthodox group and encourage them to write further bombastic prose on their websites to garner attention. It would also present the US NSA as weak and unable to protect its trademarks and intellectual property.

* * * * * * * * *

Here is a portion of the testimony in the trial:

> MR. JEFFERY A. HANDELMAN, Attorney for NSA (Direct Examination): Dr. Henderson, what caused the NSA to file the current contempt motion that is now pending before the Court?
>
> DR. ROBERT HENDERSON: The National Spiritual Assembly became aware, as a result of reports, that there were Web sites that were misrepresenting Baha'i belief and claiming to be official institutions of the Baha'i faith. We hadn't seen them, but we began to get reports. And upon investigation, we were alarmed to find that there were Web sites claiming to be the official institutions of the Baha'i faith and — and — presenting beliefs which were in direct conflict to Baha'i teachings and Baha'i principles and at broad variance.
>
> We had significant concerns about this. First, we were concerned about Baha'i refugees who were forced to flee their homes and their home countries because of their belief in the Baha'i faith, and who, in some cases, had corresponded with the wrong institutions, thinking that they were corresponding with the international governing body of the Baha'i faith and, in fact, they were sending their correspondence to some other institution.
>
> Secondly, we were concerned about the public because one of our major strategies is to advise the public of the teachings and the fact and general aim of the Baha'i faith through the Internet. In fact, our Web site has won several awards for excellence from the National Religious Communication — Communicators — Council, which is an organization that looks at religious publications and Web sites and videos, and so forth.
>
> And we won the gold medal, in fact, as having the best Web site of the faith communities in the United States.

> And, so, this is a primary means by which we communicate Baha'i belief, and who are the Baha'is, and what do we believe, and what do we do, and where can you find Baha'is close to you.
>
> Suddenly, we began to receive some alarming reports from people who were not Baha'is, but who were investigating the Baha'i faith through the Internet, concerned about what they were reading on Web sites claiming to be official Baha'i Web sites. And their concern was stimulated by the fact that the content on these Web sites was in direct conflict with their understanding of Baha'i belief; and, in fact, it was in direct conflict.
>
> And, then, lastly, there were — or penultimately, we were concerned about the Baha'is themselves who might be misled and find themselves involved in discussions — in fact, this did occur; find themselves involved in Internet forums and the like and corresponding — with organizations that were not part of the National Spiritual Assembly.
>
> And last, we were concerned with reputational harm. As I mentioned, we have extensive and longstanding relations with the United Nations, with the White House, with the — with both Houses of Congress, with the human rights community. And these are based on principles of peace and cooperation, of universal fellowship, of race unity, of the equality of women and men, and so forth. All of the Baha'i principles centered around facilitating unity and cooperation and universal well being and social progress.

Alright, here's the thing. We will always be infected with stupidity. There are, even as you sit there reading this, millions of stupid people endangering our gene pool. Heck, you or I have even on occasion partaken liberally of stupidity. No one is immune. Not completely. It is part and parcel of being human. And although we should be compassionate with each other, we should also help each other out as best we can to rise up from it.

Thankfully, we also have reason and intelligence among us. And more often than not, it wins the race. That's how we have survived this long on this, the third rock from the sun.

So there will always be people who are dumb enough to mistake the insane, bombastic rhetoric that can be found on the Orthodox Baha'i websites (like the 9/11 towers in flames

with horrible predictions of apocalypse or worse). No, I'm not going to link to it. It doesn't deserve further attention. If you really want to find it, you can.

To show you how "dumb" people can be, BahaisOnline was recently contacted by a Baha'i who inquired how their pilgrimage request was coming along. How can anyone mistake that site which aggregates and disseminates Baha'i related news and content from across the web to the "official" Baha'i pilgrimage website run by the UHJ? They don't have any similarities!

Are we going to now start attempting to protect people from their own stupidity by suing everyone who has an "unofficial" Baha'i site?

Thankfully, there are also among us many people, both Baha'i and not, that will have no trouble at all differentiating between that Baha'i blog and the pilgrimage site. Nor will they have any trouble telling apart the various websites of the Baha'i Faith (Haifa) and those from splinter groups.

What lessons can we draw from this?

The NSA needs better legal advice. As in none.

Since they would be in better shape had they no legal team, I would suggest they fire their lawyers and hire instead a pack of squirrels. After all, when did squirrels do anyone any harm?

And everyone on the NSA who suggested, recommended and went along with this boondoggle please do the rest of the Baha'i world a favor and "retire" from administrative service. It is all the rage right now. All the "cool" Baha'is are doing it: Herr Grossman and Sgt. Mitchell as we speak.

Am I being too harsh?

Perhaps. But is the irony lost on everyone that here we have an institution which is charged with the duty to establish and encourage unity… and they spend their time and the money donated, to pursue an inane litigatious process against a small group of people who believe something slightly different from them?

How about spending more time on the challenges facing the US Baha'i community?

US NSA's Petition For Rehearing Denied By Court

From a recent update on Baha'is Online I learned that on December 30th 2010, the 7th Circuit Court of Appeals has denied a petition made by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States to rehear the the case that was decided against them.

For back ground information on what this entails, please see the previous discussions on this topic:

- US NSA Loses Court Case Against Orthodox Baha'is
- Appeal Court Decision: US NSA Loses (Again)

The only option for the NSA is to accept the decision and to move on, cutting its losses. Or they could file an appeal to the US Supreme Court. The first hurdle in this process is called a *certiorari*. Going to the Supreme Court isn't as simple as Hollywood movies or your favorite incarnation of "Law & Order" would have you believe.

To provide some basic legal background here's an excerpt from wikipedia:

> In the United States, certiorari is most often seen as the writ that the Supreme Court of the United States issues to a lower court to review the lower court's

> judgment for legal error (reversible error) and review where no appeal is available as a matter of right. Before the Evarts Act, the cases that could reach the Supreme Court were heard as a matter of right, meaning that the Court was required to issue a decision in each of those cases. As the United States expanded in the nineteenth century, the federal judicial system became increasingly strained, with the Supreme Court having a backlog of years. The Act solved these problems by transferring most of the court's direct appeals to the newly created Circuit Courts of Appeals, whose decisions in those cases would normally be final. The Supreme Court did not completely give up its judiciary authority, however, because it gained the ability to review the decisions of the courts of appeals at its discretion through writ of certiorari.
>
> Since the Judiciary Act of 1925 and the Supreme Court Case Selections Act of 1988, most cases cannot be appealed to the US Supreme Court as a matter of right. A party who wants the Supreme Court to review a decision of a federal or state court files a "petition for writ of certiorari" in the Supreme Court. A "petition" is printed in booklet format and 40 copies are filed with the Court. If the Court grants the petition, the case is scheduled for the filing of briefs and for oral argument.
>
> A minimum of four of the nine Justices are required to grant a writ of certiorari, referred to as the "rule of four". The court denies the vast majority of petitions and thus leaves the decision of the lower court to stand without review; it takes roughly 80 to 150 cases each term. In the term that was most recently-concluded as of 9 June 2009, for example, 8,241 petitions were filed, with a grant rate of approximately 1.1%

I sincerely hope and pray that rationality returns – even if by a miracle – to the decision making process and this matter is left where it is. It should never have been taken up in the first place since as I've mentioned repeatedly, the word "Baha'i" is in the public domain, just as is the word "Christian" or "Jew". The US justice system does not trample on such an important issue as freedom of speech and freedom of conscience (and religion). So to expect them to side with the US NSA is to make a tragic mistake and to compound what has already been an embarrassing and rather expensive legal adventure.

Note that while based on the pattern of previous petitions there is about a 1% chance of being granted, there are two forms of petitions: *in forma pauperis* (IFP) which means that the person does not have the necessary funds or paid, that is, non-indigent. For the paid, the historical approval rates are higher, at approximately 4%. The historical IFP approval rates are extremely low at 0.5%. But that is just the beginning. If the petition is granted, what will then take shape is an extremely lengthy and even more expensive legal battle at the highest court.

The filing fee for the certiorari is $300 but the legal fees to prepare a proper petition run from four to five digits. If the US NSA wins the Supreme Court "cert lottery" and the case proceeds, they will actually have lost as the costs could escalate easily into hundreds of thousands of dollars. And there is absolutely no guarantee or assurance that at the end of this all they will not be handed yet another humiliating and costly defeat.

I don't pretend to know the Will of God nor to be a legal expert but both reason and the law is clear in the matter. Even before the decision was made by the 7th Circuit Court of Appeals, I wrote that the US NSA had no case whatsoever.

So I hope that the US NSA or whoever at the UHJ/ITC that is calling the shots knows about the importance of cutting your losses. If this were Vegas, it is well past the time to stand… otherwise, this is going to be one very expensive hand of Blackjack.

Otherwise, if the US NSA decides to continue this folly, the petition will join thousands of others in the cert pool. Then the waiting begins to see if it will be among the 1% or so that are accepted. For the legal beagles out there, you may be interested in learning about "certworthiness" a slang term used in legal circles to refer to cases that have at least a chance in being granted a hearing. Among the characteristics that make a petition "certworthy" are:

- the decision below conflicts with decisions of one or more federal courts of appeals or state courts of last resort on an important issue of federal law
- the court below decided an important federal question in a way that conflicts with rulings of the Supreme Court
- the court below decided a question of federal law that is so important that the Supreme Court should pass upon it even absent a conflict

- (a category into which very few grants fall) the court below "so far departed from the accepted and usual course of judicial proceedings, or sanctioned such a departure by a lower court, as to call for an exercise of this Court's supervisory power."

One of the most important elements is to show that the matter is of 'national importance'. I fail to see how at least four Supreme Court judges will see this matter as such.

The US NSA has 90 days to file a petition. If by April fool's there is no filing, then we can finally put this sad, sad affair behind us and move on.

Varqa Magazine

For many older Baha´is who grew up in Iran and India, Varqa, the dove (and magazine) brings back happy memories of childhood and Sunday school classes. For the past few years, Mr. Sahba (the now retired architect of the arc projects on Mount Carmel) and a few other Baha´is have worked very hard to bring Varqa back to life after a very long hiatus.

If you have children or know of children who have not heard of Varqa, please let their parents or guardians know. The project really needs your support because they are having a tough time getting to a critical mass.You can view their site here. It only costs $30 (Canadian, US or Euro) to subscribe for one year. With every additional subscription, the non-profit foundation which publishes the magazine has more resources to grow and improve their product . . . eventually bringing about a monthly (currently its bi-monthly) or international editions (currently it is only available in English and Spanish).

So keep this in mind if you are looking for an Ayyamiha gift this year.

Related Links:

Karen's follow up of Varqa Magazine's fate.

Video Contest for Iranian Baha’i Rights

The NSA of the United States is sponsoring an online video contest which seeks to raise awareness of the plight of Iranian Baha’is.

The deadline is fast approaching: January 15, 2009 so if you are interested, shake a leg. Here are the guidelines:

> Prepare a 2-minute video or animation about the denial of access to higher education to Baha’i in Iran and post it online. The video should focus on the issue of Baha’is being denied access to universities in Iran and not on any alternative educational programs which they may pursue as a means to gain higher education.

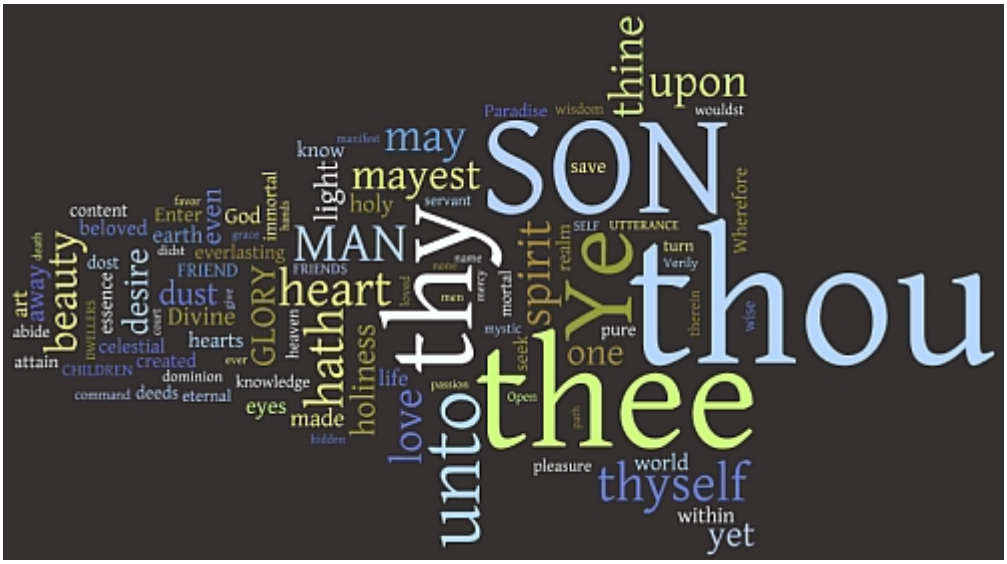
Get the full details.

The prize? The satisfaction of winning and bragging rights.

Visualizing the Hidden Words of Baha'u'llah

I'm not sure what to call this, an exercise in artistic meditation?

Here are the 99 most prominent words within Baha'u'llah's *Hidden Words* (both Arabic and Persian):



The Hidden Words are the essence of Baha'u'llah's teachings. The distillation of God's commandments, eternal. Unchanging.

Lovely words. Wouldn't mind having that on my wall as a reminder. Hmmm… it seems to be mostly about you (me… *you know what I mean!*). Not the other guy, or the gal walking down the street.

How does it make you feel?

WAR! – what is it good for?

In the past few years, the Baha'is and the Baha'i administration has done a delicate ballet around the major current events in the world – namely the war in Afghanistan and Iraq. At the same time as trying to protect the Faith and its adherents, the administration has

attempted to not appear that it is siding with any political party or agenda. This has been difficult because the Baha'i principle of non-involvement in politics is usually misunderstood. But also, it has been difficult because these current events evoke such visceral emotions in people – Baha'i or otherwise.Recently, I read this in the Gleanings:

> The one true God, exalted be His glory, hath bestowed the government of the earth upon the kings. To none is given the right to act in any manner that would run counter to the considered views of them who are in authority. That which He hath reserved for Himself are the cities of men's hearts; and of these the loved ones of Him Who is the Sovereign Truth are, in this Day, as the keys. Please God they may, one and all, be enabled to unlock, through the power of the Most GreatName, the gates of these cities. This is what is meant by aiding theone true God—a theme to which the Pen of Him Who causeth the dawn to break hath referred in all His Books and Tablets.

From this I get the clear message of separation of church and state – which is another whole different issue (also misunderstood). But I have difficulty in understanding what exactly Baha'u'llah means when He says 'don't speak up or do anything which is counter to the government or those in authority'. I wonder if He is speaking in the context of His time or whether it is something that transcends that.

As you probably know, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha had to fight their whole lives with the charge of being "subversive". Baha'u'llah, repeatedly admonishes those who spread false rumours about Him and says again and again that His only wish is to bring a new message from God to the people of the world. To Prof. Edward G. Browne, He says:

> We desire but the good of the world and happiness of the nations; yet they deem us a stirrer up of strife and sedition worthy of bondage and banishment.

Abdu'l-Baha was also similarly labelled by the Covenant-Breakers when they spread rumours that the construction of the Bab's sepulchre (later to be enhanced to become the Shrine that we know today) was in fact a fort from which Abdu'l-Baha was planning to gather the people under his own banner and wage war against the government to claim land and soverignty for Himself! So seriously were these allegations taken that Abdu'l-Baha almost called for the election of the UHJ so that the Faith would not be without leadership if anything were to happen to him.

So I wonder if Baha'u'llah, in saying the above, is soothing the worried brows of the governments of the time by admonishing Baha'is to listen and obey them. If not, then how should we as Baha'is behave in a situation where lying to the government or going against their laws would in fact save innocent lives. Such a hypothetical situation isn't difficult to contemplate. Think back to the early Baha'is in Germany. Would you lie to the Gestapo if your Jewish neighbour and friend was hiding in your basement? or would you follow Baha'u'llah's instruction above?

Obviously the principle of moderation comes into play here. Life is not black and white and we need wisdom and tact to be able to navigate the grey areas.

But then, the administration sure does speak up against governments which it believes are behaving wrongly. In fact, there has been an active agenda to use the NGO status of the Faith in the UN to lobby for better rights and freedoms for the Iranian Baha'is and elsewhere. How is that not in contradiction to what Baha'u'llah is saying above? why can the administration speak up against governments while individual Baha'is can not? where was this distinction made possible in the Writings?

Also, I found this quote about war which was alarming, to say the least:

> A conquest can be a praiseworthy thing, and there are times when war becomes the powerful basis of peace, and ruin the very means of reconstruction. If, for example, a high-minded sovereign marshals his troops to block the onset of the insurgent and the aggressor, or again, if he takes the field and distinguishes himself in a struggle to unify a divided state and people, if, in brief, he is waging war for a righteous purpose, then this seeming wrath is mercy itself, and this apparent tyranny the very substance of justice and this warfare the cornerstone of peace. Today, the task befitting great rulers is to establish universal peace, for in this lies the freedom of all peoples.

Now I'm really confused! How is this any different from the neo-con agenda implemented by the current US administration? From their point of view their motivation is righteous. They believe they are bringing peace, freedom and an improved economic standard to Iraq and Afghanistan – as well as denying terrorists a haven.

Note that I'm not commenting on the current US govt policies but rather about the Baha'i Writings and what they say regarding this topic. I'm just using the current situation of the neo-cons as a convenient example. Nothing more.

Getting back to the issue at hand, what I find confusing specifically is who is to say if a particular war is 'righteous' or not? I suppose the Manifestation of God would be able to make that distinction with His authority. But I don't think anyone else or any other institution can do that. So where does that leave us today?

Also we are told in the Writings that all rulers should rise up in unison against an aggressor nation. This is the most practical formula for eliminating wars around the world. And, arguably, we saw a version of it in the Persian Gulf war where a group of nations, led mainly by the US fought back the Iraqi army and indeed did liberate Kuwait. Unfortunately, that is probably the only recent example – more recent wars have offered the world similar opportunities but in the majority of the cases, the world has stood by and watched horrendous massacres take place without straining a muscle to stop the aggressor's hand.

In any case, how are we to reconcile these two different viewpoints? how can rulers be asked to unite and stop an aggressor when that same aggressor can claim that his war is 'righteous' and therefore sanctioned by God? Again, who decided who is morally right in such a case? what criteria can we use to distinguish between these two situations?

I don't know. But I do know that the Baha'i instititutions don't even attempt to answer such tough questions. Instead, as they have in the past 3 years, they tell Baha'is to keep quite and to be inconspicuous. They also put out such documents as "Questions and Answers on War and Related Issues" – a childishly simple attempt to answer these troubling and complex issues. This document has a Q and A format where the Baha'is are supposed to simply read and memorize the answers – ala Ruhi. No critical thinking, no discussion,etc.

But while attempting to maintain a veneer of neutrality, there are certain hints dropped here and there which might suggest that the institutions have themselves decided that this war is of the 'righteous' variety and therefore, must go on unperturbed. Maybe it is the mentions of America and its leaders in the Writings which give them this apparent conviction:

> May this American democracy be the first nation to establish the foundation of international agreement. May it be the first nation to proclaim the universality of mankind. May it be the first to upraise the standard of the Most Great Peace . . .

Various prominent Baha'is (occupying elected or appointed status within the administration) have in effect voiced similar opinions. And while they are just that, opinions, they do belie a sense that the whole administration is embued with the same 'opinion'. In speeches and talks, they are basically saying that the recent wars waged by the US is the first steps towards the Most Great Peace and that the US government is basically doing God's work!

Finally, its worth pointing out that neutrality is not always neutral. In many situations, not doing or saying anything, is considered as an implicit agreement. The fact that the Baha'is around the world have been muzzled on this issue speaks volumes of the way the people in the institutions are leaning. I especially don't understand why Baha'is were told to not participate in peace rallies around the world when the Guardian says that participate in peaceful demonstrations is ok – especially when it is to advance a principle of the Faith.

This tacit approval by the institutions for war has alienated a huge number of rank and file Baha'is. Not surprising, as most Baha'is are liberal minded and peace loving people.

No related posts.

We Have Annulled the Rule of the Sword

As my fellow Baha'is in Iran face a renewed wave of persecutions, there are some who charge the Baha'i community to be perpetrators of violence.

Of course these charges have no credibility but still I thought it would be fruitful to go to the source and see what Baha'u'llah commands:

> Beware lest ye shed the blood of any one. Unsheathe the sword of your tongue from the scabbard of utterance, for therewith ye can conquer the citadels of men's hearts. We have abolished the law to wage holy war against each other.

> God's mercy hath, verily, encompassed all created things, if ye do but understand.
>
> *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*

And again, speaking to the Babi and Baha'i community of the time, Baha'u'llah explains not only the injunction to eschew violence but He explains in no uncertain terms that His Cause has no desire to gain or hold power in the form of civil authority:

> Know thou that We have annulled the rule of the sword, as an aid to Our Cause, and substituted for it the power born of the utterance of men. Thus have We irrevocably decreed, by virtue of Our grace. Say: O people! Sow not the seeds of discord among men, and refrain from contending with your neighbor, for your Lord hath committed the world and the cities thereof to the care of the kings of the earth, and made them the emblems of His own power, by virtue of the sovereignty He hath chosen to bestow upon them. He hath refused to reserve for Himself any share whatever of this world's dominion. To this He Who is Himself the Eternal Truth will testify. The things He hath reserved for Himself are the cities of men's hearts, that He may cleanse them from all earthly defilements, and enable them to draw nigh unto the hallowed Spot which the hands of the infidel can never profane. Open, O people, the city of the human heart with the key of your utterance.
>
> *Tablet to Nab?l-i-"Azam*

I was going to write this in the comment section of a previous post but Baha'u'llah's clear words deserve a more prominent exposition. I'm going to delve further into the question of church and state within the Baha'i Faith a bit later. But can't resist for now to touch on it since it is so important an issue.

It has been not only an important issue but a contentious one for almost the whole duration of the Faith. Originally those who sought to cast the Baha'i Faith as supportive of theocracy were mischief makers who wished it ill. For example, they spread lies and rumors that Abdu'l-Baha was not building simply a shrine (of the Bab) but a citadel from which He would attempt to overthrow the government.

More recently the perpetrators are well meaning but ignorant Baha'is who have not bothered to read the consistent, clear and repeated Writings of their own Faith about this matter. Such error is dangerous whether the intention behind it is evil or not because it misrepresents the Baha'i Faith and it opens it to attacks from those who mistake it as having temporal motivations.

All I can say to fellow Baha'is who are under the wrong impression that their Faith promotes or condones in any way a theocratic model is, please, inform yourself. There are clear texts. You have but to read and study them.

> Theirs is not the purpose, while endeavoring to conduct and perfect the administrative affairs of their Faith, to violate, under any circumstances, the provisions of their country's constitution, much less to allow the machinery of their administration to supersede the government of their respective countries.
> *Shoghi Effendi*

If you don't know where to begin, a good place to start would be Church & State , a book that ~~has passed Baha'i pre-publication review (as have all books published by *Kalimat*)~~ [Ed. please see comments for clarification]. It contains a methodically and exhaustively collection of Baha'i texts on the relationship of church and state. Here is a recent and relevant entry from the author's blog.

There is no shame in not knowing but there is shame in wallowing in ignorance. As a Baha'i the standard is extremely high and our duty is to fulfill individual investigation of truth.

God bless.

No related posts.

We have met the enemy… and he is us

I don´t think most Bahai´s in the world would recognize the religion described below, where it not for the familiar titles and names such as Auxiliary Board members, Counsellors, etc. In fact most are rather alarmed and can´t quite come to believe what their eyes are telling them. I´m sure that some would even claim that the quote that I´ve included below is made up and can´t possibly have come from the Universal House of Justice.

But here it is:

Although deepening the friends' understanding of the Covenant and increasing their love and loyalty to it are of paramount importance, the duties of the Auxiliary Board members for Protection do not end here. The Board members must remain ever vigilant, monitoring the actions of those who, driven by the promptings of ego, seek to sow the seeds of doubt in the minds of the friends and undermine the Faith. In general, whenever believers become aware of such problems, they should immediately contact whatever institution they feel moved to turn to, whether it be a Counsellor, an Auxiliary Board member, the National Spiritual Assembly or their own Local Assembly. It then becomes the duty of that institution to ensure that the report is fed into the correct channels and that all the other institutions affected are promptly informed. Not infrequently, the responsibility will fall on an Auxiliary Board member, in coordination with the Assembly concerned, to take some form of action in response to the situation. This involvement will include counselling the believer in question; warning him, if necessary, of the consequence of his actions; and bringing to the attention of the Counsellors the gravity of the situation, which may call for their intervention. Naturally, the Board member has to exert every effort to counteract the schemes and arrest the spread of the influence of those few who, despite attempts to guide them, eventually break the Covenant.

The need to protect the Faith from the attacks of its enemies may not be generally appreciated by the friends, particularly in places where attacks have been infrequent. However, it is certain that such opposition will increase, become concerted, and eventually

universal. The writings clearly foreshadow not only an intensification of the machinations of internal enemies, but a rise in the hostility and opposition of its external enemies, whether religious or secular, as the Cause pursues its onward march towards ultimate victory. Therefore, in the light of the warnings of the Guardian, the Auxiliary Boards for Protection should keep "constantly" a "watchful eye" on those "who are known to be enemies, or to have been put out of the Faith", discreetly investigate their activities, alert intelligently the friends to the opposition inevitably to come, explain how each crisis in God's Faith has always proved to be a blessing in disguise, and prepare them for the "dire contest which is destined to range the Army of Light against the forces of darkness".

The Universal House of Justice

[The above excerpt is from this original document. Look for it on paragraph 72 onward and page 27 onward.]

And if you think that this is simply rhetoric or theory that is not implemented, you are in for an even bigger shock. It is not. Regularly, Baha´is like you and me are the target of witch hunts. You want names? Taheri, Karimpour, Glaysher, McKenny, Marshall, Cole, Pleasant, Gasink, and unfortunately, many many more.

What I find revolting is that not only has there been a systematic mechanism built through the appointed institutions, ala KGB, to spy and report on Baha´is, but that Baha´is themselves are being asked to snitch on their fellow believers!

This paranoia would be hysterical if it weren´t so damaging. Within a few decades it has substituted the tolerant and loving community life that once thrived with a distrustful and poisoned one. Whereas before the Faith community was based on pluralism and unity in diversity, it now seeks to inculcate a strict dogma. If you find yourself, in anyway not buying into it wholesale, then you are an "internal" enemy. A "friendly" visit by a fellow Baha´i to chat over coffee can instantly become much more sinister.

Of course, the interesting and paradoxical result of looking for negatives is that you find them, all over the place. This is the amazing power of an individual and/or collective mind. Whatever you set as your target you will attract it, like a heat seeking missile. Try it.

As you are sitting there right now reading this, you suddenly realize that your tongue feels rather heavy. You move it around trying to find a comfortable place for it. You swallow a bit but it still feels weird. Why does your tongue feel so heavy? it was fine a minute ago?

Simple. We made it into an issue. We brought a negative connotation to it as well as attention. Now you will probably spend the rest of the day preoccupied, wondering what the heck to do with your tongue. From this simple example we see the amazing principle that whatever you give attention to, your mind will seek.

This is an inestimably powerful principle. Used positively and collectively it can lead mankind into a virtuous cycle or used negatively it can spiral into a vicious cycle (as history readily attests to it). Is this why in every religion we are told to seek the good, the positive, the beautiful, the unifying and to do good, to help, to aid and rescue? Hmmm… there might be something there.

Returning to our discussion, it is worthwhile to give credit to a few Baha´is who have publicly shared that when they were being appointed to positions in the institutions, they were told that their job would be keeping files on other Baha´is, and they got up and left the room. They could not imagine doing something like that to their friends. You really have to wonder how any true Baha´i could both follow the Exemplar of the Faith, and do such a horribly unBaha´i thing as keeping secret files. I don´t know how they sleep at night, really.

No related posts.

We're Not Worthy

As I predicted in my entry about the election of Paul Lample to the UHJ, his self-published book *Creating a New Mind* is drawing a lot of new attention. No doubt all the good little AABMs, ABMs and Counsellors are finished dog-earing their own personal copies by now. Competing with them to praise this singular work is a new Baha'i web magazine.

SPIRITUAL DEGREES, which bills itself as "a Baha'i web magazine for the 5th Epoch", has started a series of articles which loosely hang well-worn platitudes on Lample's book. I really can't see what all the fuss is about since his book just reads like a compilation of

various quotes handcuffed together. But then again, that describes most of what comes out of Palabra. Maybe I'm missing something. Or maybe I'm just not worthy to grovel at his munificence, like these other good folks.

The article does contain a few honest remarks though. Its author acknowledges the shifting demographics within the Baha'i community (largely due to failure of the North American Baha'i community to grow – or stop shrinking, as it were) and says "It is clear that contemporary young adults no longer relate in quite the same way as before." He then asks: "What is it about the evolution of the community [...] that has failed to capture and maintain the interest of young adults?" Indeed.

The author then boldly sets out this goal:

> "It is our intention with this magazine to find the revolutionary spirit of this age that will captivate its young adults and inspire them to become active agents of the Baha'is community."

Well, I wish him and the rest of the Baha'is behind SPIRITUAL DEGREES the best of luck and will be looking forward to their progress. I sigh and shake my head though, because I know that if they truly do set out to accomplish that goal with single-minded regard for truth, they will be mercilessly crushed by the AO (just like Talisman I, Dialogue, the LA classes, and many individuals before them).

I do applaud their cherubic zeal and look forward to their next missive.

No related posts.

What do Baha'is do?

So you're dying to know what it is that Baha'is actually do?

Well, this website wants to answer you with several video interviews.

They are about the Ruhi sequence of courses and the different activities attached to them such as Junior Youth Groups (Book 5) and devotionals, etc.

There are more than a dozen videos, and they are in both English and French. Here is one of them:

No related posts.

What They Believe: Hindus, Zoroastrians, Baha'is a CBS Interfaith Special

CBS aired an interfaith religion special called "**What They Believe: Hindus, Zoroastrians, Baha'is**". This program is part of a Religion & Culture series from CBS and the Interfaith Broadcasting Commission (IBC). You can watch the 30 minute program at CBS:

As the title suggests, the program introduces these three lesser known religious traditions of Hindus, Zoroastrians and Baha'is among an American audience. For Baha'is, the program is well timed as it coincides with the centenary celebrations of Abdu'l-Baha's trip to the US and will dovetail with these efforts to raise general awareness of the Baha'i Faith there.

Hindus:

Anand Venkatkrishnan, a second-generation immigrant from India talks about the importance of action and how faith is more about what you do than what you believe. The program also visits Sri Maha Vallabha Ganapati Devasthanam (Hindu Temple) where Mysorekar a abhisheka ceremony is performed.

Zoroastrians:

We meet Roshan and Rohinton Rivetna who moved to the US to find themselves isolated from their faith community. Slowly they established a new 700 member community and their son, a second-generation American Zoroastrian serves his faith as an architect designing temples combining tradition and modern designs. Since Zoroastrians must marry other Zoroastrians, the small size of the worldwide community (only 125,000) presents a challenge.

Baha'is:

The Wilmette Temple features prominently as a Baha'i landmark and symbol. Several Baha'is including S. Valerie Dana, a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States (and an officer, Deputy Secretary) are interviewed.

After a brief introduction of the Baha'i Faith, Scott Conrad, the Project Manager of the Baha'i Temple's new Welcome Center, and architect for the US Baha'i National Center

shares the history of the mother temple of the West. Two members of the Baha'i National Communications Office, Glen Fullmer & Ellen Price, also participated in the production.

No related posts.

Where is the Garden of Ridvan?

After His imprisonment in the Black Pit, Baha'u'llah was exiled to Baghdad. The group arrived in the capital of modern Iraq in the spring of 1853. Baha'u'llah soon left to live in solitude for two years in the mountains of Kurdistan. In 1856 He rejoined the Holy family in Baghdad and wrote among His most important works: the Kitab-i-Iqan (Book of Certitude), the Hidden Words, and the mystical Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys as responses to questions from Sufi mystics.

Baha'u'llah lived in Baghdad off and on for ten years, which is probably why He designated it as one of two sites for Baha'i pilgrimage. But the authorities became wary of Baha'u'llah's growing influence so they once again banished Him. This time to modern day Istanbul, Turkey (Constantinople).

As the belongings of the household were being prepared for the move, Baha'u'llah retreated to ~~a small island within~~ the bank the Tigris River [see below for correction]. There, He and a small group of Babis who were devoted to Baha'u'llah camped out in tents for 12 days.

On the 9th day the rest of the Holy family came to join them. The hours passed with Baha'u'llah chanting and revealing verses among the trees and greenery of that garden which was renamed "Ridvan" or Paradise. Some time during those days, we don't know exactly when, Baha'u'llah explicitly told them that He was the One foretold by the Bab.

Baha'is all over the world celebrate these days with special attention to the first, ninth and last as Baha'i Holy Days.

Could this be the location of the original Ridvan?

Curiosity got the better of me, so with the help of Google Maps, I searched along the section of the Tigris River that runs through Baghdad. There were quite a few 'small islands' which could qualify. I chose one of them to show you in the picture on the left.

Want to search for the Garden of Ridvan yourself?

Use the + – to zoom in and zoom out, you can also grab the map and push it around.

Here you go:

UPDATE:
Thanks to Don & Steve (see comments below) the site of the Garden of Ridvan is found!

I was wrong to assume it was an island. It was actually situated on the banks of the Tigris River.

It is on the banks of the Tigris River just in front of the present site of the **Medical City hospital complex** (labels A and B) in the map above. Right now many Iraqis are rushed there for emergency treatment as a result of the violence. Please keep the people of Iraq and the soldiers stationed there in your thoughts and prayers during this Festival of Ridvan.

Right now Baha'is are advised to not travel to Iraq for Baha'i pilgrimage because it is simply too dangerous. But I don't have any doubts that within our lifetime this will change. Wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to go and say a few prayers on that spot?

Who Owns the Expanding Lakeshore at the Wilmette Temple ?

An interesting development on the Lake Michigan shoreline adjacent to the Baha'i Temple at Wilmette is presenting a challenge to the Wilmette Park District and the Baha'is of the United States.

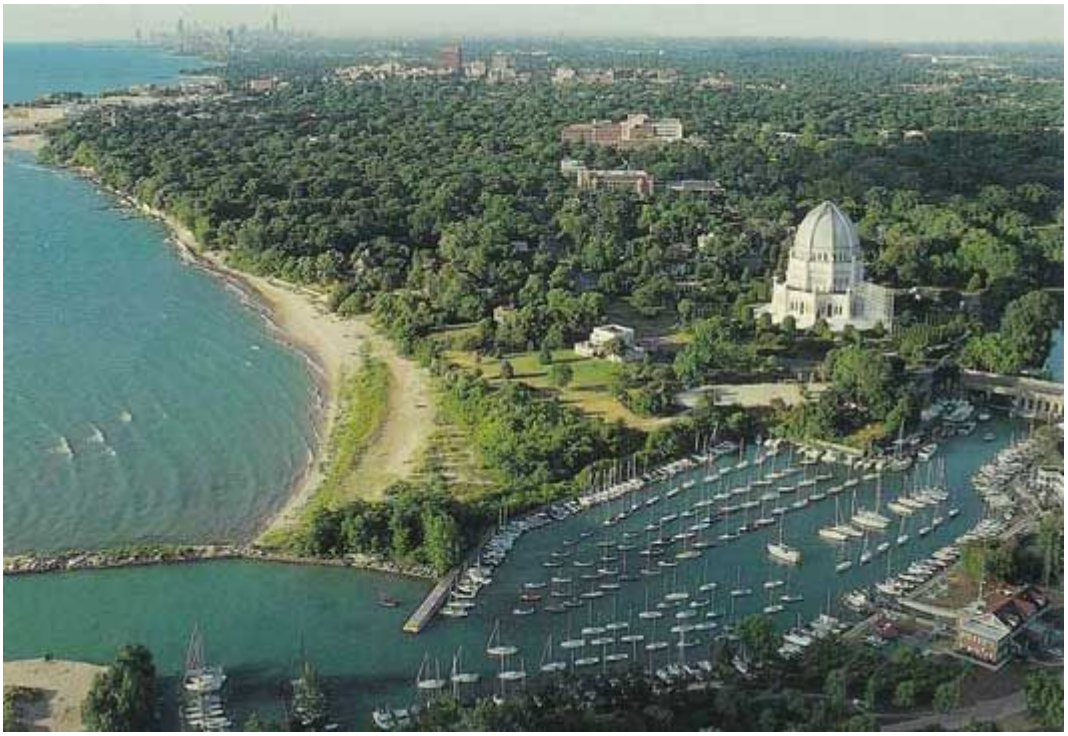
Over the past 40 years what used to be merely a thin sandy beachfront has grown to become about two acres of land. That's large enough to fit two football fields or more than 87,000 square feet.

The issue hinges on whether the new land was created as a result of natural processes or whether it was man-made. If it is deemed to be natural, then the Baha'is will continue to have ownership of it. If it is shown to be a result of artificial origin, then the it will default to the state of Illinois.

To view a larger aerial view of the area with the disputed lakefront area marked by a red rectangle, click the image below:

What complicates the situation further is that the Army Corps of Engineers dredged up sand from the lake and deposited on the south beach in 1976 and 1978 with the express purpose of expanding the beach area. Another similar project was done in 1980.

The size and location of the new real estate makes it very valuable. Especially as a *de facto* expansion of the Sheridan Shores Yacht Club. There has been no official move by the Wilmette Park District to claim ownership. That would most probably begin a lengthy legal dispute.



For more information, see this recent Chicago Tribune article.

No related posts.

Why We Don’t Have Peace in the Middle East

Ever wonder why we just don’t seem to ever get traction in attempts to enable peace in the Middle East? Why is it that hate and violence rules the day?

Take a look at this short clip from a children’s show produced by a tv station backed by Hamas. It depicts Farfour, a Mickey Mouse ripoff that is killed by a Jew:

How can we expect anything but cycles of violence when children are brainwashed this way? In fact, if peace does break out it would be the most shocking thing. Miraculous even.

Until this cycle is broken, no manner of conferences, no amount of UN resolutions and no external pressure will ever produce a lasting peace. [sigh] Here's hoping a miracle does happen. I'm so saddened when I think about how little, innocent minds are indoctrinated this way.

I've contacted the tv station to see if Farfour will make another appearance from Heaven with his quota of 72 furry mouse virgins. No word yet. But stay tuned.

You Mean Baha'i, Right?

If you live in a large enough city, you eventually will run into this sort of placard (unfortunately attached to a loony person). Right there, between "DRUNKARD'S" and "CATHOLIC'S"… I think the misspelled word is meant to be Baha'i. Misspelling is of course, the least of this person's problems.

I had no idea I ♥ the devil. Including Baha'i, little ol' me fits into six of the categories. Can you beat that? Do you ♥ the devil more?

Boy, that's a lot of hate. About the only thing this person seems to love is Jesus... and' apostrophes'.

Bonus points if you can tell us what P.K. stands for in *Jeebus-speak*.

Oh and before I forget… ***McCain '08!!***

100 Year Anniversary Abdu'l-Baha's US Visit – Special from Kalimat Press

In honor of the 100 year anniversary of Abdu'l-Baha's historic visit to the US in 1912, Kalimat Press will gift a book to you with the purchase of any two or more books from their catalogue.

Here you can see a large collection of rare pictures of Abdu'l-Baha during that trip to the US.

Kalimat Press has a wide catalogue of books which includes many historical and academic works on the Babi and Baha'i Faiths. For example, R. Jackson Armstrong-Ingram's "Written in Light: Abdu'l-Baha and the American Baha'i Community, 1898-1921"

> Browse through the history of the American B??h??'? community with this delightful collection of photo- graphs and text. Several new photos of 'Abdu'l-Bah?? are included which show his intimate relationship with the American believers. Other photos give a glimpse of early American B??h??'?s at work and at play, in B??h??'? meetings and in each others homes. These pictures– some serious, some playful–include children, youth, and adults. They demonstrate the strength, the depth, and the remarkable racial diversity of the early B??ha'?s. Get this "family album" and discover the rich heritage left by our spiritual ancestors.
>
> A beautiful, coffee-table sized book with sixty-two unique photographs. Perfect as a gift!